



成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

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III

電撃文庫

ヴあんぷ! III

【2ヶ月ぶりだね、日本の紳士淑女諸君!
今日は少々血生臭い話をするとしよう】

【復讐——そう、復讐の話だ。活劇から
悲劇に至るまで、様々な物語に取り入れ
られる王道とも言うべき要素だよ】

【復讐は常に新たな復讐の芽を生む。様
々な物語でよくそう言われるものだが……
仮に、相手の親類縁者全て、さらにはそ
のまた縁者をも復讐の対象とし、全てを
滅ぼし尽くす覚悟だとしたら？ おそらく
復讐の連鎖は止まるだろうが、その者
に安らぎが訪れる事は無いだろう】

【そんな覚悟をしてしまった者は、この
世界と——己自身にこそ復讐をしたいの
だろうからね】

そして、吸血鬼たちの時間が始まる——。



[It has been a long time, ladies and gentlemen! Today, allow me to impart to you a tale most vicious in nature.]

[Vengeance. Ah, yes. A tale of vengeance. It is a universal theme in the realm of fiction, found in every genre from adventure to tragedy.]

[It is often said that vengeance gives birth to yet more vengeance. But what, pray tell, would happen if the avenger left nothing behind that could continue the cycle? If he were bent on erasing everything about his target, from his close family to his distant relatives?]

[Indeed, he would have his revenge. But there is one thing he will never take hold of from that day forth—peace.]

[After all, a man who is prepared to go so far will ultimately wish to turn that vengeance upon himself and the world.]

And so, the curtain rises on the hour of vampires...

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

イラスト●エナミカシミ

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ヴァンパイアアカデミア



Written by Narita Ryohgo
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「さて、今日は吸血鬼と人間との『愛』について話をしよう」

今日は吸血鬼と人

「吸血鬼が人間に恋をする事は、実はさして珍しい事ではない。外見が人間に似ている、あるいは元々人間だったものが変化して吸血鬼となつたケースが多い。」

「そういう意味では……レックとフェレットの二人は、この島で生まれ育った人間と吸血鬼の両方の価値観の複雑で生きてきた。そして、我が息子は人間でありながら夜を受け入れる一人の少女に恋をした」

「……無論、愛という感情が成り立つという事は、それきりうれしい事ですよ。かつてこの島にいた人間と吸血鬼の感情複雑とした力アップを一

「まあ、互いに感情を向け横たわった結果、野やの子供に与える愛情が少なかつたというか……だから、あんなにひねくれてしまったのだろうか」

「まあ、今のレーリックとヒルダの関係は、ガオアドの両親にそっくりだよ」

「――息子にそう云ふなり、こねでもか、といつもに苦悶な苦笑いをされなかね」



[Now, then... Allow me to discuss the matter of romance between humans and vampires.]

[It is not at all uncommon for humans and vampires to enter a relationship that transcends the boundaries of our respective species. Perhaps this is due to our great physical resemblance to humans. Or perhaps it is in large part due to the fact that many vampires were once human themselves. But I believe the greatest reason for this occurrence is the fact that we are capable of communicating with one another. From the ability to convey one's intentions, to the ability to lie, threaten, and extort—one cannot overlook the fact that our capacity for communication heavily influences the prevalence of this phenomenon.]

[My children Relic and Ferret, born and raised on this island, have for their entire lives lived between the different value systems belonging to humans and vampires. And as for my son, he has come to love a girl who accepts the world of Night in spite of her humanity.]

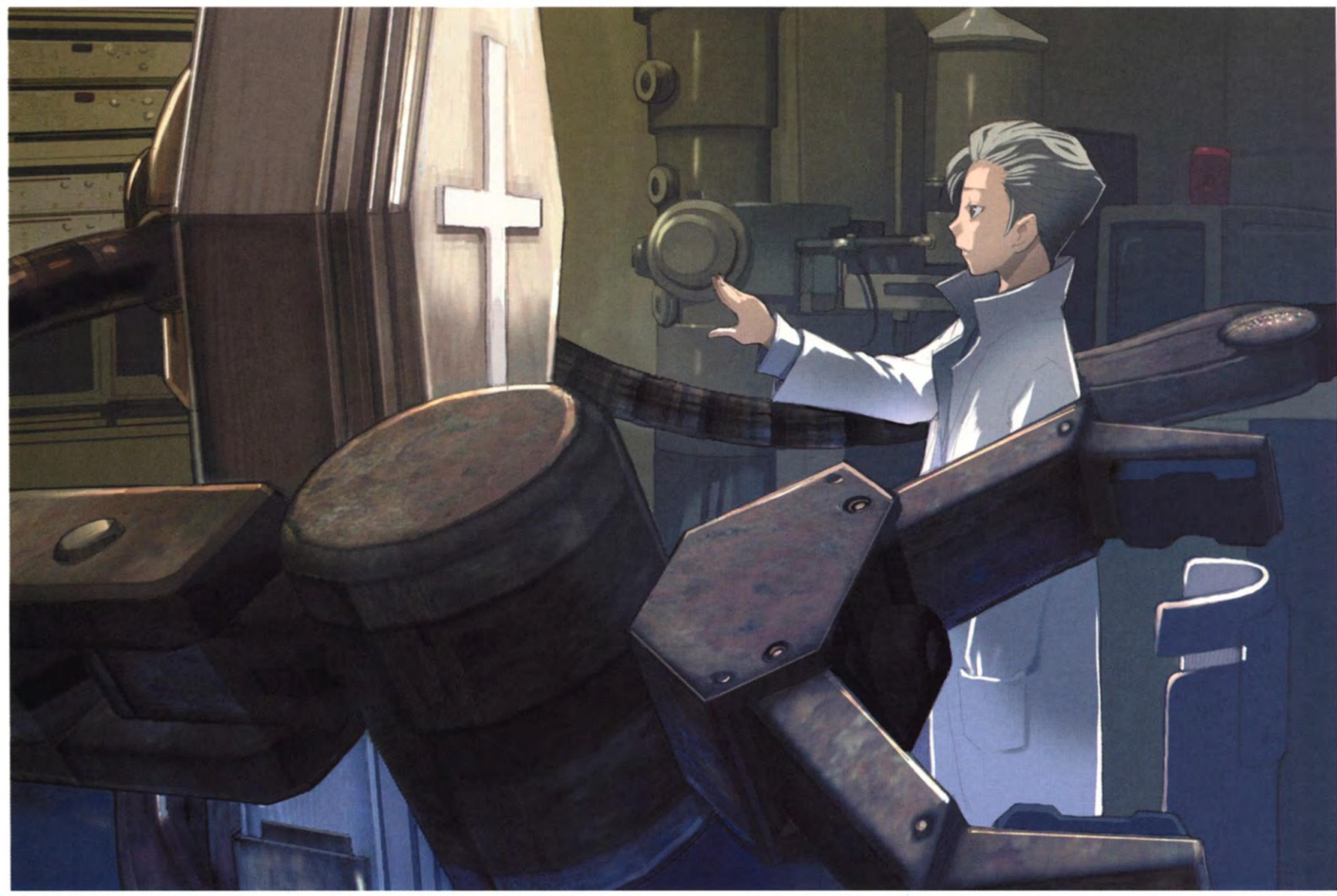
[...Naturally, the fact that love is possible at all for vampires means that we are also capable of mourning a lost love, just as humans are. That is why these two so greatly fear losing one another. Sometimes this sentiment can become a weakness, and at other times it can become their greatest strength. But is this not an age-old observation on the quality of love?]

[As I continue to watch over the two, I come to be reminded of another human-vampire couple who once lived on this island, so very much in love with one another.]

[But in the end, their love for each another was so strong that they did not have quite enough care to spare for their child. Perhaps that is why he grew to be so full of resentment.]

[In any event, Relic and Hilda's relationship seems to me like a mirror image of that of Watt's parents.]

[...When I confessed this to my son, he chuckled bitterly with an incredulous look.]



[Allow me to tell you the story of a certain vampire.]

[At one point in the past, this vampire's mind was indescribably warped and twisted. To be more accurate, however, I suppose I should say that his mind had been warped and twisted at the hands of another.]

[In any event, this vampire committed countless sins. By human standards of justice, he would be fit to die for his crimes. (Of course, being a vampire, he would never be brought to judgement in a human court.) And at the time, the thought that someone might pass judgement upon him did not even cross his mind. After all, what child expects to be tried for murder by the ants upon which he tramples?]

[But one day, sense returned to the boy's twisted mind, and his warped psyche righted itself instantly. Perhaps it would be most accurate to say that his sanity had been restored. But in any case, the weight of all his sins—the violence he had done upon so many humans—instantly fell atop him like an armful of bricks.]

[The boy lived in fear of his own sins and the days to come. At the same time, he desired judgement. To be punished for his crimes by the girl who happened to be there beside him, who knew of all the things he had done. In other words, he desired death at her hands.]

[But instead... he received forgiveness.]

[Though he had granted the right to judge him upon her and her alone, the girl elected to forgive him. Could you imagine? If you were that little child trampling upon the ants... If, one day, you came to realize that the ants possessed minds and lives of their own. If, at that very moment, one of these ants looked at you with positively saintly eyes and said, "I forgive you". Would you be able to accept that forgiveness?]

[Though he was hated by every one of the humans and vampires around him, the one girl to whom he had given the right to pass judgement upon him chose instead to show mercy... Yes. To the vampire, this show of forgiveness was in itself a sort of punishment.]

[Unable to pass judgement upon himself, he no longer knew what he should do with the sins with which he was burdened. So time passed as he continued to hesitate. Ironically enough, the one who stayed at his side to support him all the while was the girl who had forgiven him.]

[Why in the world had the girl chosen such a path? And what happened to the girl and the vampire afterwards?]

[My sincerest apologies. I know little of what happened from that point on, and even if I did, I do not believe it is something I should speak of myself.]

[But one day... The day will come when that story will be told. If that vampire truly has the resolve to face his past, then he will make that a certainty.]



[What is the vampire's greatest enemy?]

[The answer is, without a doubt, humanity.]

[Just as humans can become our servants, slaves, masters, lords, neighbors, friends, or lovers, they can also just as likely become our enemies. They say that the greatest threat to humanity is humanity itself, and I am of the opinion that the same goes for us vampires as well. Especially as humans outnumber us so greatly.]

[And in order to put an end to our constant persecution at the hands of humans, we established a certain organization. Now that I look back on it, I am quite surprised that we were able to gather so many strange and varied vampires into a singular group.]

[A particularly memorable friend, you ask? Ah, my sworn friend from childhood, Melhilm Herzog, comes to mind. Though our friendship waned momentarily due to a certain incident in the past, that wound, too, has healed in time.]

[Another memorable friend from the Organization would be Caldimir Aleksandrov, a man who held a great deal of hostility toward me. If only he would tell me exactly what about me it was that bothered him, I would have spared no effort in attempting to change that part of me. But in any event, I respect that man greatly. Though he has his moments of absentmindedness, he is a man willing to go as far as it takes to achieve his goals... However infrequent that may be.]

[Ah, yes. Including former members of the Organization like Sprite and Pink, there are countless vampires who left a lasting impression on me over the years. Why, Garde Ritzberg, the Black Gravekeeper...]

*Eight hours of discussion omitted.

[A vampire I hold particularly dear, you say? Naturally, that would be my beloved fiancée Dorothy Nifas... Please, don't ask me to relay the story of our relationship. Even I am capable of embarrassment, my friend. Does my ruddy complexion not speak for my bashfulness?]

[Now, then. Let us discuss a hypothetical situation.]

[Let us say that a certain target of revenge has come to see the error of his ways, and was doing everything in his power to atone for what he had done. How would you respond?]



「さて、例えば、の話をし

よう

「ある復讐の対象か、心から
その罪を悔い、今ではそれを
償うために生きていようとす
るならばどうするかね？」

「ほんと、それが君の答えか、
だが、例えば、君の友人は、

君と同じ答えを出すと思う
だろうか？」

聞く者によつて全く違う答え
を出すだろう。大事な者を奪
われた経験がある者に聞いた
ところでは、答えはそれぞれ違
いを見せる。

「復讐とは、復てしてそういう
ものだ。せめて相手が今も
変わらぬ悪人のままたつたな
らば、また答へは被られるの
だろうかね。結局、その罪をど
う償わせるかは、復讐者達の
個々の判断によるだろう」

「だからこそ、社会には、法
というものが存在するのだが
、理念ながら、吸血鬼に對
しての法律を施行している自
治体は少ない。宗教によつて

は吸血鬼を明らかに敵とし
法を定めて、いるのだが」

「うう！」

吸血鬼は、法からの懲罰は憎と

るが、法からの援助は憎と

[Ah, so that is your answer. But do you think that your friend would come to the same conclusion? I promise you, each and every person would have a different response to this question of mine. Ask anyone who has lost a loved one; the answer will vary greatly from person to person.]

[That is what revenge tends to be. If the target were a monstrous villain, unchanged from the day of his crimes, then the avenger's reaction would be simple. But how to make the target repent for his sins? That is left to the avenger to decide.]

[This is why laws exist in society. Unfortunately, very few organizations enforce these laws upon vampires. Many religious groups, of course, designate us to be enemies, if that could be called a sort of law.]

[In other words, one can never expect help from the law in taking vengeance upon a vampire. And so, to take revenge, one must at once become an officer, a prosecutor, a witness, and an executioner. For *all* standards to be left at the discretion of the individual—that is what it means to be unprotected by the law.]

[To pass judgement upon another and even carry out their punishments by the measure of one's own standards is a most tiring effort. Not only does it eat away at one's soul, it may also cut down the avenger's life in the midst of the attempted execution. After all, things like lives and souls are protected only by law and society.]

[But there is one thing that those who would avenge themselves must never forget.]

[Those who step past the bounds of the law in order to pass judgement must one day also judge themselves for the sin of the execution.]



He was a monster wearing the face of a human child.

By human standards, the monster was unnaturally beautiful. Though his heart was full of malice, it was at the same time pure.

But he was not a child in shape alone.

Because he was indeed still very young.

But that was more the reason why he was so difficult to control.

Just as human children trample upon ants,

He placed little meaning in

Devastation,

Destruction.

Drunk on pure power.

The child was endlessly drunk

On the fact that he was special.

Not knowing that once he awoke,

His world would be turned upside-down.

7章 橙色は嬉々として



Chapter 7 - The Orange Officer Tastes Delight, and...

"Now this is something else, O Great Leader Caldimir Aleksandrov."

A self-assured voice entered the quiet conference hall.

"If you're going to scatter to dust, I'll gladly play audience to your death throes."

A lone woman stepped into the room as the carved wooden walls glinted in the candlelight.

She was dressed much like a military officer, and her short hair and tone of speech made her look somewhat like a cross-dresser. She was about twenty years of age in appearance, but her youthful features clashed with the uniform she wore.

She was in the process of addressing the other person in the room. But the addressee was, at the moment, not quite a 'person' in form.

"Grk... Argh... Don't just stand there and watch, Laetitia... Help me..."

The owner of the anguished voice was a human pincushion, crucified on a cross of blood. His body was filled with dozens of wood splinters.

Most people would have died after being subjected to such violence. But the pincushion known as Caldimir was not human. His nature as a vampire kept his soul tied to the world of the living, and his luckily uninjured face was still able to enunciate the voice squeezed out through his ragged lungs.

"I was in... a minor accident.... Urgh... In this state, I can't even turn to fog..."

"Duly noted. I passed by the Black Gravekeeper on the way here. Garde's handiwork?"

"Yes! Shit... That barbarian! You have no idea how glad I am to see you here. If you could just pull out the splinters around my heart... Ugh..." Caldimir pleaded. But the woman called Laetitia responded with a cold look unbecoming of her elegant appearance.

"No."

"W-why?!" Caldimir cried, his eyes wide. Laetitia flashed him a cold grin.

"Shits and giggles."

"This is no time for jokes at my expense, Laetitia!"

"Who's joking? One soldier's misfortune is another's lifesaver."

Realizing that no amount of screaming would get him off the wall, Caldimir elected for a more sensible approach.

"If you're going to play soldier, why don't you try and act a little more rationally?" He asked condescendingly.

"Of all the jarhead questions... I am not trying to impersonate a soldier."

"You're not?"

"These clothes are a hobby of mine."

"What's the difference... Never mind."

Caldimir refused to allow himself to be drawn into Laetitia's pace, sticking to the business at hand. That was a strategy he applied when he dealt with the other officers, many of whom were possessed of highly eccentric personalities and characters. To lose himself in Laetitia's brand of logic would only serve to put him at a disadvantage in their upcoming negotiation.

It was also a strategy he only learned after his dealings with Gerhardt.

Though sickened by the recollection of his old friend, Caldimir held onto his temper and continued.

"...Never thought you were the kind of scoundrel who'd forget everything her master'd done for her."

Laetitia sighed and shook her head.

"That... actually kind of hurts."

"Then why are you laughing as though you're embarrassed?! If you have time to play around, you have time to help me! ...Ahem. Please. Please help me. I'm begging you."

The woman loudly cracked her neck. Her smile disappeared, giving way to a mask of iron.

"Let's hear it. I'm all ears."

"...What are you talking about?"

"...That scheme you and Zygmunt cooked up."

"That's... wait. Something's not right here, Laetitia Gitarin Aztanduja, the Orange Magic Lantern! How did you know we were planning something? You weren't even present during the conference!" Caldimir cried, unable to hide his shock, "...Ah, I've got it! You have this entire room bugged! You claimed that you couldn't make it time for the conference, but you were actually spying on us the entire time! You saw it all, didn't you?! How I rolled around on the floor by myself, how I was beaten to a pulp by Ishibashi and Bridgestone, how I was nearly murdered by Garde, how I was practicing my glorious speech in secret before the meeting began, and how I cooed, 'Did kitty get lost~?' to a cat that wandered into the hall! You reprobate! What are you up to? Planning to kill me to take leadership over the Organization?! Hah! You have no right! And even if you did successfully take my life, no one would acknowledge your leadership! Know the meaning of shame!"

Caldimir's tone grew steadily more forceful as he shook the conference hall with his voice alone. Although he wasn't necessarily being loud, his tone was dignified enough to make any human freeze up in fear.

Laetitia, however, looked at him with an expression of utmost pity.

"...I told you. I met Garde on the way here."

"...Hm?"

"I only happened to hear something vague about you and Zygmunt being up to no good."

The conference hall was filled with silence.

Caldimir was frozen still for a few moments. But he soon spoke up, his tone crawling from the depths of his stomach.

"Kill me. You have the right to take my life."

"No."

Caldimir's expression was defeated but determined. And for the first time in their conversation, Laetitia allowed her emotions to show clearly. It was an expression of annoyance.

"Didn't know you were a cat person."

"KILL ME NOW! Don't embarrass me any further!" Caldimir cried from his place on the wall, shaking his head like a child throwing a tantrum. It almost looked like he was in tears.

"And because a slimeball like you happens to come up with some half-baked scheme for power, an entire island's going to be left FUBAR. Incredible."

"...So you knew after all."

"No, but you sent in Zygmunt. I can make a good guess as to what you're scheming."

Laetitia's expression had been growing more and more clear from her laugh onwards. Her face was twisting into a malicious grin.

"What're you planning? Caldimir, our oh-so-mighty leader?"

Caldimir sensed the gravity with which Laetitia emphasized her question. He stopped struggling for the moment, and calmed himself as he responded to her with a smile.

"Ha. I suppose there will be no harm in disclosing our sublime, eminent, and most magnificent plan to you."

With that, the leader of the Organization finally regained some semblance of dignity.

"Before that, our dear leader Caldimir. I'm going to ask you something."

"What now?"

"...What's this about some glorious speech you were practicing?"

"KILL MEEEEEEEEE!"

Dozens of minutes later.

Caldimir had finally calmed down, though he was still stuck to the wall.

"...Do you recall the research Melhilm was undertaking? With the watermelon?"

"That business about merging the abilities of vampires."

"Yes. At first, the research was focused on creating a 'purebred' by selective breeding, but Gerhardt got his hands on the final product—Relic—before we could."

Although it was a rather unflattering way of describing Gerhardt's adoption of Relic, Caldimir seemed to have changed the sequence of events in his memories to match his claims.

"So that was when Melhilm changed his mind. Instead of fiddling with genetics, perhaps we could gather these abilities together via a transcription of the soul."

"...News to me."

"Not surprising in the least. I didn't know a thing myself until Melhilm told me after his recuperation."

The officer Melhilm Herzog had wasted a great deal of time and effort in the pursuit of the 'ultimate vampire'.

The kind of vampire that most resembled the ones from myth and stories.

A Master of Night.

A monster.

A god.

A vampire fit for such grandiose titles, possessing the powers of all vampires while having none of their weaknesses, born to reign supreme over his brethren.

But before the first product of the experiment was born, the vampire couple who should have been the final catalysts escaped the clutches of the Organization and sought asylum in Growerth. Thus, the experiment ended in failure.

Having determined that trying to retrieve the subjects would pose too great a risk, Melhilm poured his efforts into yet another study whilst keeping an eye out on the island.

"At the time, the technique of using Eaters to transfer abilities hadn't yet been discovered. So at first, the new experiment consisted of transcribing different souls into a vampire that had been turned for the specific purpose of the study. But all of Melhilm's efforts ended in failure. The vampire he used as the subject was left a grotesque mess of a monster. His body and psyche were brutalized by the experiments, but the experiments that left him in that state ended without bearing fruit."

"We'd have gotten word if he'd succeeded. So what happened then?" Laetitia asked, her tone as cold as ice.

"...So that's when the idea of plant-based vampires came to Melhilm. Not naturally-occurring types, but plants that are turned after being showered with the blood of a vampire. Soon after the watermelon subject underwent the metamorphosis, he would pour more blood onto it—blood from a different vampire. And through that method, he would transcribe the

souls of multiple vampires into the newborn creature, which would ideally cause it to develop all kinds of different powers."

"Let me guess. Another failure."

"A disaster. Though the plant he used for the experiment became a vampire and ended up developing something close to human intelligence, the problem was that this vampire was a failure who wasn't even capable of subjugation."

Caldimir sighed and chuckled bitterly. Laetitia looked at him with her stony mask once more. She was already certain—that failure of a vampire was Caldimir's target, and he was still hiding the most important part of the story.

Perhaps Caldimir noticed her suspicion; he spoke up before she could complain.

"Don't rush me. I'm only going in order. So this watermelon was, at first glance, a failure. Its only ability was telekinesis and the ability to create illusions that made it seem like it was a shapeshifter. At least, that's what we thought. But just before Melhilm was nearly devoured by a certain Eater, he came to an earth-shattering conclusion. Even that failure would be capable of success!"

"Clarification?"

Laetitia had taken a seat in a nearby chair. She seemed to have decided to lend Caldimir an ear as he went on his long-winded explanation. Her youthful eyes glinted all the while with several centuries' worth of experiences lying in wait.

"Let me ask you, Laetitia G. Aztanduja the Orange. Think about this from the perspective of a long-lived vampire like yourself. Let's suppose that there was a vampire who somehow became the President of the United States, or some sort of powerful mob boss."

"...Not entirely impossible."

"And let us suppose there was another vampire. He can walk through walls, and he can turn invisible whenever he wants to. No one can touch him, but he can attack people with ease. And he has no weaknesses. He can get a tan on the beach while kissing a crucifix. However! This vampire can never take a position of power among humans or vampires."

Though Caldimir spoke in a theatrical tone, the examples he cited were quite detailed. Realizing that the descriptions were meant to point at specific individuals, Laetitia silently urged him to continue.

"So, Laetitia. Given the choice, which of these two vampires would you envy more?"

The woman in the uniform took a moment to think over the matter.

She seemed to be going over several scenarios in her mind, but she soon tilted her head with a response.

"The first vampire has the power to change the world. But the second's freedom is undoubtedly attractive. But... there are no such vampires. Even Relic was born with weaknesses."

"That's correct. Think of the first example as Relic von Waldstein. The symbol of absolute power and influence; strength incarnate. I would have no qualms about naming him the strongest vampire in the world. But in comparison, the second vampire... is invincible."

"The strongest versus the invincible. Straight out of a cheap B-movie. Get to the point. Does 'Invincible' exist?"

"Yes."

Caldimir's response was quiet but firm.

That one word was enough to make Laetitia freeze. And as though being led by the flow of the conversation, she recalled the earlier part of their discussion and reached a conclusion.

"That 'Invincible'... The plant vampire?"

Instead of giving her a straight answer, Caldimir recounted a certain name.

"Valdred. Valdred Ivanhoe... The watermelon who holds the key to achieving my goals."

†

Waldstein Castle, on the island of Growerth.

"Valdred... I... I don't know how to thank you..."

"You can thank me after the festival. And besides... there's a bunch of things I wanted to ask you, too."

Valdred Ivanhoe stepped out of the castle, completely ignorant of the fact that there was a conversation about him taking place many miles away.

He was holding the hand of the bespectacled girl who followed close after him.

"Something... you'd like to ask?"

"We can get to that later. For now, let's just enjoy the party. What do you say?"

"Oh! Yes!"

The girl—Selim Vergès—smiled shyly, slightly hesitant. Val responded with an embarrassed laugh.

It was a heartwarming sight to behold, but no one marveled at the sweetness of the scene.

That did not, however, mean that the castle was empty. In fact, it was bustling with more activity than it saw on any normal day.

There were only a few minutes until the opening ceremony of the Carnale Festival, a celebration honoring the island's most venerated artist. Countless people from all over Growerth, Germany, and the rest of the world had gathered there to participate. Although

Val and Selim were near the back of the castle, which was not quite packed yet, the front courtyard of the castle was beginning to look like the stands of the Formula One Grand Prix.

Because the visitors were all captivated by the sights of the castle, from its beautifully-lit architecture to its perfectly cultivated gardens, no one gave Val and Selim the slightest bit of attention.

Even their conversation was being drowned out in the lively chatter, forcing them to speak more loudly than usual.

Because the crowds and the noise were so overwhelming, it had taken some time for the presence of humans to properly register with Selim: The fact was, she was currently amidst a throng of people.

"Oh..."

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh... Um... Aaaahh... Um... I..."

Finally understanding what she had gotten herself into, Selim paled and clung to Val's arm.

Val, whose character was currently that of a young boy's, blushed like a tomato at Selim's actions. If he had been in the form of a woman, or perhaps a more composed man, he might not have been so shaken. But he could not transform there—though the people were paying no attention to him, he could not risk causing a commotion.

In contrast to Val, who stared at the girl on his arm with his face flushed, the alraune paled and trembled.

"I... I'm sorry... It's just been so long since I was surrounded by so many humans..."

"Oh... right. S-sorry. I shouldn't have dragged you out like this, Selim. I'm really sorry." Val apologized, noting Selim's discomfort. But something about her words nagged at the back of his mind.

'Huh?'

A moment later, he understood what it was that bothered him.

'It's... "Been so long"...?'

Selim must have lived underground all along. So how could she ever have been surrounded by people?

Val prepared to voice his curiosity. But at that moment,

"Eek!"

There was a light impact against his shoulder, and the scream of a young girl.

Realizing that the scream did not belong to Selim, Val hurriedly turned to the owner of the voice.



"Oh, I'm sorry..." Said a girl dressed in humble clothing, bowing at Val. She was speaking English.

As soon as he registered the fact that the girl had bumped into him, Val realized that he was standing in the middle of a thoroughfare. Because he was standing side-by-side with Selim, it was not surprising that he ran into someone the moment he let his attention waver.

"No, it's my fault for standing around like that. I'm sorry." Val replied in English, making sure to draw on his knowledge of the language in order to give her a fluent reply.

Selim also gave the girl an apologetic bow. Because she was the reason they had been standing in the middle of the thoroughfare, she also felt responsible.

"Oh! What a lovely flower you have there!" The girl said with a smile, looking at the top of Selim's head.

"Oh..."

Val tensed. Part of Selim's hair was shaped like a flower in bloom. Although he thought that it might not be particularly eye-catching in the midst of the many costumed festival-goers, the fact that a stranger so readily noticed it nudged him toward panic.

But the girl said no more about Selim's hair, disappearing into the crowds with a brief word of goodbye.

There was an awkward moment of hesitation. But Val eventually smiled and took Selim's arm, searching for a place from which they could get a good view of the opening ceremony.

"Excuse me."

A voice he had never heard before whispered from behind him.

"You, with the green hair. I would like to ask you something."

The voice was not speaking German, but Val instantly realized that it was Japanese. The city of Rukram, which had recently become a part of Neuberg, was sister cities with a town in Japan—this led to a good deal of Japanese influence coloring the city. Val was also acquainted with quite a few people of Japanese descent. Not only that, the knowledge that had been transcribed into him also included a detailed understanding of the language.

"Yes?"

And so, he responded.

It was much too careless an act for a creature who should have been running from human beings.

When Val turned, he came face-to-face with a stranger. The man looked around to make sure that there was no one of Asian descent within earshot. He smiled.

"So you are a vampire after all. If you happen to be a relative of Sir Gerhardt, I'd like to ask you to take me to him."

For a moment, Val felt as though his heart would stop. Although he did not possess such an organ to begin with, even his illusionary body broke into sweat as he responded to the man with trepidation.

"What... do you mean?"

"There's no need to play dumb. I'm also a vampire."

'How'd he know? All I did was answer him...'

Generally, only Eaters had the power to sense other vampires. But if the man was indeed an Eater, he would have no need to go to the trouble of greeting Val—after all, all he had to do was ambush them when there was no one around.

Val would likely be able to avoid being devoured. But he could not speak for Selim. Although he knew that she was skilled in combat, he did not know if her powers would be effective against an Eater.

All he could do was pray as he continued to stare down at the stranger.

First, he would pray that the man was indeed only a vampire.

Second, he would pray that the man was not an enemy.

The man seemed to have taken notice of Val's cautious gaze. He said sheepishly,

"Please excuse me. I promise you, I am no Eater. Let me introduce myself."

The man was probably being so deferent to Val because he was certain that the latter was a vampire. That was because it was impossible to tell a vampire's age from appearances alone. Vampire-borns who matured to a certain age before their growth halted completely sometimes showed such age-dependent courtesy even to younger vampires.

"My name is Ishibashi Aiji."

But Val was the one freezing up at the introduction.

"I'm not certain if you know, but to members of the Organization, I am known as 'Indigo'."

†

An underground conference hall, somewhere in Paris.

"So you sent Zygmunt, Melhilm, Rudi, and Theresia to the viscount to get your paws on that watermelon."

"Yes." Caldimir grinned as Laetitia recounted the situation he explained.

"This is messed up even by your standards. And all this time, I thought you were trying to capture Relic."

"And who gave you that information?"

"Ishibashi. I came here to confirm his intel."

Caldimir made a face at the mention of the name.

"Of all the problem children... Although I'm almost certain I've fooled him into protecting Relic, he might even have gone to the viscount to negotiate—to take custody of Relic before Zygmunt can get to him."

"Doubtful. Ishibashi is a man of honor. He would never cross Gerhardt so easily."

Caldimir grew anxious.

"Hmph... I still don't understand how that mass of blood manages to attract such loyalty..."

"Refrain from expressing your self-righteous envy, Caldimir."

"Tch."

"I could tell you fifty-three more things about you that bother me. Care to hear them?" Laetitia said coldly.

Desperate to change the direction of the conversation, the man who led the Organization said forcefully:

"Back to the point! During the conference, I emphasized my intent to retrieve Relic in order to keep everyone's attention on Relic and Gerhardt. But the vampires here are surprisingly sharp. Words alone won't be enough. That's why I sent in those two as bait."

"Hraesvelgr and Nidhogg. I agree that they're powerful assets of the Organization. But you know what will happen if you send them to Growerth." Laetitia said firmly, intending to clarify Caldimir's intentions.

However, Caldimir refused to look away, instead meeting her hostile gaze. In fact, it almost looked as though he welcomed her implied question.

"Of course." He said simply, "but it doesn't matter how many people have to die, suffer, weep, vomit blood, languish in pain, begrudge me, or hold a thousand people's worth of bloodlust against me. As long as I achieve my goals, I care nothing for anyone but myself."

Though his words were mechanical and cold, they struck Laetitia with great force—not because of the terrible nature of his claims, but because she could sense the gravity hiding behind Caldimir's facade of serenity.

And yet she did not show a hint of having been rattled. Laetitia responded to him as though nothing was wrong.

"...After all these years, you're still a mystery. Sometimes you're a shameless clown, and other times you're positively demonic. When you're fighting one-on-one, you're among the strongest vampires in the Organization, but against multiple enemies, you're the weakest of us all. On one hand, there's the you that rescued me from humans by analyzing the Hunters that chased me one by one, manipulating them into facing you alone, and eventually wiping them all out. And on the other hand, there's the sad self-proclaimed leader who fails to

invite Black, Mirror, Gold, Silver, Pearl, and Clear out of fear of retaliation." She said, listing off his contradictions one by one. Caldimir cut her off.

"...Is there a problem with that? It is true that killing humans one-on-one is pure simplicity for me. And it's also true that those like Black and Mirror honestly intimidate me. Those bastards take orders from no one. They ignore my plans and laugh at them, while picking apart everything I say one word after another..."

The gloom that permeated his voice earlier in the conversation was no longer there. Such was the nature of Caldimir—quick to shift between emotions. But he soon put on a more serious look as he changed the topic.

"In any case, Rudi and Theresia will wreak havoc on Growerth now. Once Rudi hears about the Waldstein family, he will go berserk. And though Theresia may exercise more restraint..."

Caldimir trailed off. A cruel grin rose to his lips as he continued.

"...Once she finds out that he lives on that island, she'll move on our behalf, whether she likes it or not. As soon as she sees Theodosius M. Waldstein..."

†

Waldstein Castle.

"I see. So you were one of Watt's subordinates. I'd heard about a shapeshifting newcomer to the Organization before, but to think I would run into you here..."

Once their respective identities had become clear, Ishibashi addressed Val without a hint of restraint.

'Ishibashi Aiji, the I-Shadow.'

Though Val's time in the Organization had been rather short, even he had heard of this man before.

Within the Organization that was created for vampires to exchange information relevant to escaping human persecution, there was a group of high-ranking officers known as 'Rainbow'. Ishibashi was one of them.

The Organization was now technically his enemy, but Val found himself disclosing his name to the man for two reasons. One was that Ishibashi, in spite of his moments of volatility, was known for being a part of the moderate faction. The other reason was that he had caught sight of Ishibashi's eyes.

Although there was a smile on his face, there was a sharpness to his dark eyes that made Val wonder if he could possibly lie to him and get away with it. Making false claims without good reason would only leave a bad impression on Ishibashi. But Val thought that, perhaps since he had also betrayed Watt—a traitor who had inflicted so much agony upon Melhilm—an enemy of an enemy could possibly come across as a friend. The character of the young boy whose shape he was assuming, at least, hoped so.

And that hope came true with surprising promptness.

"Hm? Come to think of it, Watt is still technically a member of the Organization. Under whose jurisdiction, now...?"

The man seemed to hold no hostility against Val, even letting slip a critical piece of information.

"In any case, my impatient younger brother's gone to meet the mayor, so I'd like to speak to the viscount. If only that brother of mine could be more honest to himself—he's the one who wants to see the viscount more."

And he did not seem to be hostile to Gerhardt, either.

Val was slightly relieved. So he decided to take Ishibashi to the parlor inside the castle, where the viscount was likely to be. He headed for the back doors with Selim in tow, wearing a forced grin.

"I'm sorry for interrupting your date." Ishibashi chuckled.

"Wh-what?! No! Th-this isn't... uh... it's not...!"

Unable to finish his denial, Val turned and glanced over at Selim. But she was unable to understand their conversation, which was taking place in Japanese. She smiled back cluelessly.

Val was becoming more and more embarrassed. He tried to change the subject by asking a question that had been bugging him for some time now.

"Um... say... How'd you know that we were vampires?"

"Hm? I didn't sense you as Eaters might, if that's what you mean. I just noticed it as I observed you."

"How?"

"Your gait, your line of sight, the way you breathe—or don't—and other little things, all adding up together. The two of you stood out from the humans around you. Another clue was the fact that a boy so young could speak German, Japanese, and English so fluently. So I took my chances."

Though Ishibashi was being quite humble, Val was floored by the officer's observations.

Were he and Selim so conspicuous in this sea of humans, he wondered to himself in horror, but Ishibashi quickly took note of his anxiety.

"There's nothing to worry about. Humans probably won't be able to tell. Those differences you showed were very subtle. After all, you two didn't notice anything about the girl who bumped into you, did you?"

"What?"

"She's most likely a vampire herself."

"Oh... I see..."

'I had no idea...'

Val was surprised that he hadn't noticed a thing about the girl, but in hindsight it wasn't so shocking. After all, Growerth was full of vampires, and scheduled for tonight was the opening ceremony of the biggest festival on the island. Vampires from all parts would be coming to show their respect for the viscount. And to begin with, Val had no idea how many vampires were on the island normally.

'I've lived here for more than a year, but now that I think about it, I never made the effort to learn more about Growerth, did I?'

He finally came to the realization that he had wasted a great deal of time and opportunity during the past year he spent on Growerth. And as though looking to find redemption, he turned to the one he wanted to learn about most on this island.

But Selim only smiled back at him, slightly nervous. Val had no way of figuring out what she was thinking.

"And... that boy over there is probably a vampire as well. Look. The one in white." Ishibashi said from behind Val.

Val followed the man's finger with his eyes.

And he caught sight of a familiar face.

'Doctor?'

Val had seen him not so long ago in the laboratory. At the time, Doctor was chuckling as he went over the results of his physical examination. But now, he was walking toward the back of the castle with a look of utter anguish.

Normally, Val would have thought nothing of it—Doctor might have been out on an evening stroll, for all he knew. But the fact that Doctor was walking around outside bothered him greatly.

"What's he doing? I heard he hadn't left the underground in a long time."

Though it was indeed strange, Val did not question Doctor's departure any further.

'He must have been looking forward to the festival, too.'

With that, he gave up on his line of thinking.

But that was quite understandable.

After all, Val still had no idea.

Many guests had arrived on Growerth that day.

And some would go on to cause tragedy that night.

†

An underground conference hall, somewhere in Paris.

"Theodosius M. Waldstein. I've never met him myself, but the Organization's listed him as a threat. You, Melhilm, and Gerhardt are the only ones who know his face."

Caldimir chuckled and nodded.

"That's right. He's not part of the main Waldstein family, but he is of their bloodline. Though he's nothing but a stain on their name at this point."

"That depends on what earned him his place at our list of threats." Laetitia said coolly. Caldimir guffawed.

"Hah! What did he do? Well, that is the most important part."

Caldimir was clearly satisfied at the disgrace of Gerhardt's family. His laughter was full of vigor, like that of a mythical vampire who had just drank dry the blood of a virgin.

"Yes... Theodosius, a member of the Waldstein family, put us vampires in danger. He went around convincing humans that we were dangerous to them, in spite of whatever he might have truly intended."

Laetitia was silent.

"How many people did he slaughter? Several? Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands? Or even more? We have no way of knowing at this point. We can't even tell between his handiwork and the crimes committed by other vampires, or the works of some crazed human serial killer. He went all over Europe... From east to west, without any particular resolve. Men women elders children infants pregnant injured ill ladies gentlemen prettyboys twits beauties wallflowers alike without mercy or prejudice were killed and killed and killed and killed and killed by him, this legendary mass murderer... He avoided leaving behind incriminating evidence by starting with tiny settlements in the countryside that had little contact with the outside world. He erased entire villages off the map! But there was no way the Organization wouldn't take notice of his actions. Yes! We followed after that monster for the sake of justice. That machine of destruction, the disgrace to all vampires, who attempted to extinguish humanity from the world! I would have strangled him myself! With these two hands! Until he was nothing but a pile of ash!"

Caldimir didn't so much as take a breath during his long speech. On his face was an expression that might have convinced a stranger that he was possessed by the ghost of that mass murderer.

But Laetitia knew better than to assume such a thing. After all, the mass murderer was still alive.

The series of incidents caused by Theodosius M. Waldstein were still quite recent for someone of Laetitia's age. She recalled the facts that had been reported to her about his actions.

"That incident in the German countryside. It was the site of his final murders, and the only time he left any survivors."

"Yes! That's exactly it. That rampaging monster was nothing but destruction incarnate, and this was the only productive result of his actions. But to think that those two children would mature so well!"

Laetitia had also seen the survivors. She had even spoken to them in the past.

They were a pair of Eaters raised to be the Organization's hounds and fighting dogs—Theresia and Rudi.

Given the monikers of Hraesvelgr and Nidhogg respectively, they had become two of the top Eaters of the Organization. Slaughtering hundreds of vampires who stood in the Organization's way, they performed their duties as dogs admirably.

"They were born to butcher vampires—no—anything, living or undead! And we are the ones who raised them! No vampire is a match for—no, most vampires are no match for their powers!" Remembering the bandaged vampire who had turned him into chunks of meat earlier, Caldimir corrected himself. "Yes... They are the cream of the crop. Even their food was a cut above the rest. Even other Eaters couldn't possibly hope to defeat them! Not even the one who devoured the flesh and blood of our ally Melhilm... Not even Shizune Kijima."

†

The island of Growerth. The south side of the city of Neuberg.

The city streets were lined with buildings in the style of traditional German architecture. But one place in particular broke the mold with a decidedly Japanese look. It was Growerth's martial arts mecca, the Neuberg Dojo.

"Osu! Thank you very much! Osu!"

Firm cries of thanks punctuated the air. The children mixed in Japanese greetings into their German, stampeding to the doors with things like uniforms, boxing gloves, bamboo swords, naganata, or Japanese bows hanging over their shoulders.

One boy took off on his bicycle. One of the girls ran off on foot. But no matter the mode of transport, it was clear that the students were all headed for the festivities that were scheduled to begin that night.

Once the commotion subsided, the dojo was quickly filled with a cold silence.

But that did not mean that the building was empty.

There was a large sparring ring just inside the front doors. The sliding doors were all left open, leaving the great room filled with dozens of large tatami mats.

Though the mats were still a fresh green, the individual straws were already falling apart. They were a testament to the powerful impacts they had been subjected to inside the dojo.

There was a man in the midst of it all, standing in silence without so much as twitching.

In spite of his imposing build, he blended into the room as though he were a part of the walls.

The man, cloaked in silence, turned to a corner of the dojo and spoke.

"...Will you not show yourself now?"

His tone was neither harsh like a soldier nor resonant like the voice of an opera singer. But his voice filled the dojo to its furthest corners, bringing to light the presence of another person in the room.

"Took you long enough to act like I exist. Why'd you go to the trouble of calling City Hall about me if you weren't even going to talk to me?"

"Seeing as you are still fit to speak, I see my worries were unfounded."

"...So you even realized I got hurt."

The second voice was coming from a corner of the dojo, behind the shadow of a decorative tree.

A woman with long black hair crawled into the light, dragging herself along the floor.

The moment she emerged completely, the injuries ailing her became clearly visible.

Everything below her ankles was gone, as though her feet had been torn off. Something resembling black tar was coating the amputated areas, stopping her bleeding. It was a grisly sight, looking almost like the woman's feet had been melted off by the tar.

But the muscular man remained stoic.

"Your friend will be here for you shortly. Lie down on the tatami mats awhile."

"You gotta be kidding. I have no friends. Don't make up relationships for me. Especially not with that third-rate piece of shit!" The woman snapped with monstrous anger.

The term 'monstrous' was quite fitting, as the woman—Shizune Kijima—was a vampire.

Although the man was hit with a wave of bloodlust that would have scared most anyone, he did not react. But it was not that his trained physique deflected the anger—he had accepted the force and parried it away like a swaying willow.

"I see. I apologize for the misunderstanding."

Seeing the man bow his head in apology, Shizune let her bloodlust die down and put on a different face—one laughing bitterly at her own wounds.

"Never mind. I only came to you because you're one of the only people who know any Japanese. So I'm not going to ask you to help me. But I do want to cut a deal with you, Traugott-sensei."

Shizune was clearly rejecting sympathy, but the man called Traugott allowed himself to be sympathetic nonetheless.

"...I am not so skilled in the medical arts that I could use my abilities to bargain with an injured woman. If you have time to feign strength, acknowledge your weakness and wait for your acquaintance."

Normally, Shizune would have instantly reacted with anger and hostility at such words. But not now. The man before her was an ordinary human being, but she knew well that he was her superior in many ways.

Strength. Experience. Position. Physical age. Mental age.

What precisely was so great about him? Shizune had never considered the specifics herself, but what was certain was the fact that she did not want to risk crossing him.

Traugott Geissendörfer was the de facto master of the Neuberg Dojo, and a career martial arts instructor who taught for all sorts of educational programs. However, the money he earned on the side by participating in tournaments or appearing on TV shows easily dwarfed his regular income.

Because he was away so often, he was on Growerth as much as he was gone. But he had been on the island for the past several weeks in his position as the master of the dojo, perhaps because of the Carnale Festival.

Although Carnald Strassburg was the undisputed top celebrity of the island, adding the condition of 'currently living' would elevate Traugott to that position. He had received honorary citizenship at the city of Rukram before its merging with Mozartungen, and the residents of Growerth—both the humans and the vampires—treated him with great respect and awe.

Just like humans, vampires could also be starved for entertainment. And the idea that someone from their own hometown was making waves in the world outside also cheered them greatly.

One factor that contributed to the vampires' love for Traugott was the fact that he knew a great deal about vampires himself. Some claimed that he could overpower vampires despite his humanity, and many who bore witness to his superhuman feats were inclined to agree.

Traugott had trained in Japan, Thailand, and China in the past, and was able to speak the languages of the countries he had visited. So Shizune had gotten in contact with him and did odd jobs at the dojo, receiving some pay in return.

But she had no intention of being in Traugott's debt. She had intended to hide so he wouldn't notice her injuries, but he had so easily sensed her presence.

There was no point in being picky. The amputated areas around her ankles, covered in asphalt, were starting to go numb. Shizune knew that she had no other options.

"...I'll pay you later, so I'd like some food. Preferably something meaty with bone, and some milk. And... could I use the bathtub?"

"The bathtub?"

"Otherwise I'll get blood everywhere. You don't want your holy ground here getting all slopping wet with blood, do you?"

"It seems to my eyes that you are no longer bleeding, Shizune." Traugott said, leaving his question unstated. Shizune chuckled masochistically.

"The asphalt's seeping into my veins and skin. My legs aren't regenerating. So I thought I'd just rip off everything from the knees down."

†

An underground conference hall, somewhere in Paris.

"But they are the Organization's dogs. They will listen if Dorothy or Ishibashi commands them to desist."

"Not once they find out that the Waldsteins are involved." Caldimir said with a calculating smile. Laetitia shook her head.

"You'd stir up conflict between fellow members of the Organization. There is nothing to be gained from this, Caldimir."

"I have much to gain from this!"

"...Childish as always." Laetitia sighed.

"Hmph... I was only joking. I'm not so irrational that I'd set my own pieces against one another. That is why I'm using Zygmunt as bait."

"The eyes of the world will be on that festival, and you send in Zygmunt?" Laetitia said. It was a reasonable question. After all, the Organization's purpose was to protect vampires from unjust persecution and death at the hands of humans. But their problems would snowball uncontrollably if they exposed a conflict between vampires to the masses.

Caldimir, however, looked nothing short of casual as he grinned, his fangs glinting in the light.

"Hahaha... Don't be foolish, Laetitia. That is exactly why I sent in Zygmunt. You already know how far this plan of ours can go."

"...Airborne infection of humans."

It was a strange term to be using to describe the ability of a vampire.

"A vampire who can create allies through airborne infection. It's not so difficult to imagine the terror Zygmunt is capable of! In most zombie films, all it takes is a single bite to be infected. But what if the virus was carried through the air? The movie would end before it even started. Yes! There would be no story—no incident left for humans to recall!"

"You're enjoying yourself."

"Indeed I am! Zygmunt may have great difficulty in turning humans, but my comrade can easily subjugate every human on the island and make them bend to my every will. Those rulers of the island—both of Day and Night—will understand the magnitude of this power as they struggle to save the countless people under their care."

†

Neuberg City Hall. The hallway outside the mayor's office.

Paintings had been hung in the hallway in anticipation of the Carnale Festival.

Although the building looked more majestic than usual that night, most of the employees working at City Hall were already at the heart of the festivities at Waldstein Castle. The halls were silent.

In that silence, two shadows stirred.

Pointing a microphone at the bespectacled mayor of Neuberg—Watt Stalf—was a reporter.

But Watt was staring as though the microphone was a loaded shotgun.

"What was it that Melhilm demanded back from you? And what is it that we are here to find? It is the young vampire we left under your command, Watt Stalf."

The vampire in the guise of a reporter—Zygmunt Kiparis—mechanically recited Caldimir's demands to one of the most powerful men on the island.

"Valdred Ivanhoe, that watermelon's name was..."

"Val...?"

The mayor frowned at the mention of the name, responding with a question without even thinking.

"What do you want with *him*? If you're here to take everything back, why aren't you taking the clown and the magician? Is there something I should know about that watermelon?" Watt said, recalling that Val was the only one of his former subordinates whose face he couldn't remember.

Zygmunt, however, shook his head.

"There is no need to disclose this information to you. In fact, your knowing the truth would only hinder our plans. And remember that you do not have the right to refuse to cooperate."

"Son of a bitch..."

The truth was all Zygmunt told.

"I have subjugated a full forty percent of this island's population. Though they are not yet aware, if I give the command, they will die without a second thought. Without reason. If I

order them to cease breathing, they will refuse to exhale until they pass away. My ability overpowers even human instinct."

Forty percent. The number hit Watt in all its magnitude. His temple twitched.

"Yet this is only the beginning. The island's population is still on the rise as more visitors flood in to enjoy the festival. But if I choose to do so, I can subjugate every last human on the island, and even the birds and the animals if necessary."

There was no exaggeration or lie in Zygmunt's mechanical claims. He looked almost like a robot to Watt's eyes.

Most people would have been struck still by fear at that point. But Watt, in spite of the fact that he was now essentially powerless, responded with a genuine, forceful voice.

"So... what kinda deal is Mr. Zygmunt-the-invincible trying to cut with me? Am I so fucking terrifying that you need to take hostages to negotiate?"

It was clear that he had no more options. The situation was a dead ringer for the possibility the viscount had explained to him earlier in the evening, so Watt had no reason to doubt the man's claims.

Zygmunt was capable of causing airborne infections. Although it was hard to believe, vampires always defied the boundaries of logic. If there was a viscount made entirely of blood, the idea of a vampire who could infect humans like a virus didn't sound quite so far-fetched.

And yet Watt did not wish to accept it. To do so would be to acknowledge defeat.

He could probably emerge victorious if he abandoned the people of Growerth.

But he rejected that option before even considering it.

After all, what use was there in defeating Zygmunt in such a way if the victory automatically spelled his defeat against the viscount?

The moment he abandoned the islanders, he would lose to Gerhardt von Waldstein. Though there was no official competition or rules pertaining to one, Watt knew that he would feel defeat down to his very bones.

Though they were different in that one ruled over Day and the other ruled over Night, Watt knew very well that if Gerhardt were in his position, he would never forsake the humans.

He came close to losing his temper at the thought that he was taking Gerhardt into the equation, but Watt forcibly quelled his anger and returned to the matter at hand.

"...Hurry up and answer. Can't cut a deal until you lay out some terms."

"There is no hurry. Although most of my business with you concerns naught but small details, let us begin; have the watermelon come to this place. That will make matters much easier."

"...What are you, a retard? Why don'tcha just go to Gerhardt if you want that watermelon that badly? Him and the magician... and the clown. None of 'em are my underlings now."

"We already know." Zygmunt said, shaking his head. "But rumors tell us that the clown—Pirie Mistwalker—is still obsessed with your person."

The moment Zygmunt mentioned the clown vampire, Watt felt cold sweat running down his back.

"Give orders to the clown. Have her lure Valdred here."

"Bastard..."

Watt glared at the reporter with gritted teeth. The man remained entirely stoic.

"This first job is a relatively trivial matter in comparison to another task which requires your cooperation."

"What?"

"I cannot read the memories of the individual humans whom I have subjugated. To be specific, I am unable to find the individual I need."

"...?"

Watt frowned, completely lost.

"A human? I thought you were here for the watermelon. What the hell do you want with a human being?"

"...Do not make me repeat myself. In order to take custody of Valdred Ivanhoe, we must turn all eyes to Relic for a time. Though I have no qualms about taking the watermelon by force, Comrade Caldimir would prefer to avoid such a method."

"Quit stalling and tell me what the hell you're planning."

Determining that it might be dangerous to anger Watt any further, Zygmunt sighed and got to the point.

"What is the name of the lover of Relic von Waldstein?"

There was a force and weight to Zygmunt's voice that wasn't present before. It was as though refusal would be met with the instant realization of his subjugation over the island.

But the moment Watt made to speak, a hole was blown through the reporter's chest.

What he first felt was the wind left in the wake of the attack.

He then heard it—the sound of something cutting through the air.

And before he knew it, the reporter was left with a gaping hole.

However, there were no flashes of red flesh and organs. It was literally a hole, blown clean through the man in a perfect circle.

"Wha...?"

Watt looked on in utter confusion. The reporter quietly looked down at his chest and brought a hand to his wound.

A moment later, blood began spilling from the hole.

The force of the spill was rather weak, perhaps because Zygmunt had been shot through the heart—or perhaps because he was a vampire. Watt only realized that he was speculating when he looked down at the red stain on the carpet.

"Urgh...?"

It was only when he saw his own blood that Zygmunt finally gasped in anger and confusion.

At the same time, his bleeding stopped and the hole in his chest began to shrink. Although he regenerated at about the same rate Watt was capable of, perhaps Zygmunt was the type of vampire who could withstand a blow to the heart. Or perhaps he had, like Watt, hidden away his heart elsewhere to safeguard it.

As Watt continued to analyze the information the scene provided him, a snicker shattered the tense atmosphere in the hallway.

"Hey, hey! That's more than enough bluffing outta you, Ziggy."

Once more, there was a whoosh. The sound of something cutting through the air.

It was as though a small plane had flown by right next to Watt.

The sound echoed five times as the windows in the hallway shook in their frames.

And the moment the sounds passed by,

"Gurgh..."

Five more holes were blown through the reporter's body.

His body looked like a gigantic hole-puncher was used upon it. Normal humans would not have been able to withstand such attacks.

The one who drove Zygmunt to such a state then casually turned to Watt.

"Huh. So you're the mayor? Mind if I just call you that?"

"...Who the hell are you."

The intruder was holding something shaped like a gun in his right hand, Watt noted. 'Shaped like a gun' was a fitting way to describe his weapon, as it was clearly a fake—a children's toy.

The plastic texture of the gun was quite clear under the fluorescent lights. But holding the toy was not a child, but a grown man with blue eyes and blond hair who looked to be about the same age as Watt.

"Me? The name's Bridgestone. Yellow Bridgestone."

The man introduced himself with surprising openness. Watt didn't even have to pry to get his identity out of him.

"And, let's see here... I'm an officer of the Organization, and dunno if you already know this, but I'm also Yellow of Rainbow. Don't sweat the name; I just made up an alias to match my title."

"...! I've heard of you. That Japanese guy is your older brother."

"You're hurting my feelings, pal. I've got a bit of a complex with being compared to my brother, you know? Anyway, I should normally expect some respect here, seeing as I'm a member of Rainbow and all, but I don't sweat that stuff, so cut your worryin'. I dropped by here 'cause my brother told me to, but who'd have thought I'd hit the jackpot just like that? That's what being a gunman's all about. The way things're rolling, I bet I could beat John Wayne in a fistfight now. Serious!"

The man calling himself Bridgestone spun his toy gun in his hand, rambling about everything and nothing at once. He then turned back to the reporter.

"All right, Zygmunt. Playtime's over. And so's your job." He said, casually addressing the dying vampire. "First, you're gonna have to tell me where I can find Melhilm."

"I refuse."

In spite of his injuries, Zygmunt remained eerily calm. The look of agony had subsided, and he was not even sweating despite the severity of his wounds.

"Comrade Caldimir is the only one who has the right to give me orders. Furthermore, he has instructed me to ignore your commands for the duration of this mission."

Bridgestone shook his head, astonished.

"Shoulda beaten the old bastard harder." He mumbled, tightening his grip on his gun and withdrawing his grin. "So Zygmunt. I know what you're thinking. You don't think I got any more bullets left in my magnum. You're wondering if I used all six or if I still have one shot left, am I right?"

Reciting a line straight out of a gangster movie, Bridgestone slowly hooked his index finger onto the trigger of his gun.

There were clearly six holes bored though Zygmunt's body, but no one pointed that out.

Watt and Zygmunt made to speak simultaneously. But at that moment—

There were no gunshots.

The sound of something slicing through the air shook the hallway once more.

The reporter's body was doing a distorted dance across the carpet.

The repeated impacts assaulting his body forcibly twisted him into a spin.



With each impact, holes were shot into his body, flesh was torn from his arms, and pieces of his head fell off. He was rapidly losing human form.

For the first time, Watt was witness to the process of the attacks. He finally understood what was happening.

Each time Bridgestone pulled the trigger of his plastic handgun, a black mass was fired from the barrel.

It was not a bullet.

There was no sound and no smoke. Not even the smell of gunpowder.

But the gun was firing something.

Watt focused on the projectiles that were flying across the room. Eventually, he saw them.

Cutting through the air and shooting through Zygmunt were little monsters with glinting fangs. They compressed their bodies to the utmost limit, spinning their entire bodies as they moved to drill through air and flesh.

They mercilessly tore at their target's body.

"Sorry 'bout that. My gun isn't actually a six-shot." The gunman said flippantly, pulling the trigger over and over again.

"Cause I'm the bullets, y'know? So basically I have infinite ammo. Just like a video game! Wait. You already knew that, didn't you? Ah well. Ahahahaha!"

Though Bridgestone's tone was casual, the bats kept shooting out of his gun one after another.

"Ahahahahahahaha! Ahahaha hahahahaha haha hahahaha hahahaha hahahaha hahahaha ha ha ha hahahahaha HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

He laughed like a broken record as he continued his mad assault against Zygmunt.

Each bat that was driven into Zygmunt's body raised its fangs and twisted itself even more, devouring his flesh as it went.

It was a grotesque feast happening at breakneck speed.

In the path of the predators there remained nothing but empty space.

"Ahaha! Hahahaha aha haha... YEAAAAAH! I haven't gone this wild in way too long! Like super—wait. I'd almost add a super- to this! Hah! What do you think, Mayor?"

Yellow turned with a grin on his face. By that point, he and the mayor were the only people left in the hallway.

The third man had been devoured by the countless bullets Bridgestone had fired at him. He had lost his form entirely, not even a single bone remaining where he stood.

"Hey..." Watt breathed, his face a mix of shock and disbelief. "You're... an Organization officer."

"Yeah? Oh, you don't trust me? Makes sense; we've never met before and all. Officers don't share personal info or anything. And I don't make a point of remembering the other officers' underlings, either."

"That's not what I'm talking about. Weren't you two... supposed to be on the same side?"

Zygmunt had claimed to be here on a mission for the Organization. And yet Yellow, also claiming to be from the Organization, had killed him without a moment's hesitation.

"Hey, hey. Don't get the wrong idea. I didn't kill him. We just have some issues on our end that need sorting out, so I just got in his way for a bit."

"That pile of ground beef over there, huh?"

"Hm? ...! Oh! Ah, I get it!"

Bridgestone, finally seeing Watt's point, waved his arms in front of his face.

"No, no, no. This guy here's just one of Zygmunt's Branches. I killed 'im off to announce war and stuff, but Zygmunt's totally fine. This reporter guy's gonna come back in no time."

"?"

Though Watt did not understand what Bridgestone was trying to say, there was one thing he understood.

"In other words... You didn't hurt this Zygmunt guy one fucking bit?"

"That's what I've been saying, dumbass!"

Though it seemed like things would grow hostile thanks to Watt and Yellow's attitudes, the conversation continued as though that was no hindrance.

"Hey, wait just one goddamned second here."

If Zygmunt was still alive, that meant the lives of the islanders were still at the mercy of the enemy.

"Asshole... You just fucked up everything."

"What? Oh, I get it. I mean, on my end, it was just me getting the drop on ol' Zygmunt. But I just cost you your chance to negotiate, huh? Right. Zygmunt's holding the entire island hostage and all that. I totally understand." Bridgestone said, nodding to himself.

Without warning, he opened one of the windows. It was evening outside, and the last of the sunlight was disappearing over the horizon. But the city was filled with a brilliant glow, perhaps thanks to the festival that was starting that night.

"But y'know? That's none of my business."

"..."

"Dunno 'bout my brother, but I don't give a hoot about what happens to the humans here. All I care about is stopping Zygmunt. Whatever negotiation you two were planning doesn't matter to me one bit."

From a human's perspective, Bridgestone's attitude was callous and cruel. But Watt was not particularly angered by his stance. After all, the Organization did not exist for the protection of humanity. And to add, Bridgestone's neutral viewpoint was still considerate in comparison to vampires who saw humans as nothing but prey and playthings.

What angered Watt, however, was Bridgestone's next claim:

"But then again, I guess I might think about keeping those humans safe if Mr. Gerhardt asked me. Hah!"

"...!"

The gunman put a foot on the windowsill.

"So that's all for now, Mayor. I'm probs gonna go a bit trigger-happy today, so thanks in advance for permission. And don't worry 'bout Mr. Gerhardt. My brother's gonna go talk to him."

The moment Bridgestone finished his sentence, the very air around him began twisting.

He was rapidly wrapped up in the distortion, and the darkness around him morphed into the shape of a gigantic bat. A moment later, he threw himself into the evening skies.

Then, something like the sound of a rocket launch shook City Hall. The windows shook even more loudly than before.

The dog-sized bat catapulted itself from the wall of the building, melting into the darkness.

With the force of a cannonball,

And the sharpness of a bullet.

The dhampyr left in the wake of the departure held the windowsill in an iron grip with a look of stubborn calm.

'Son of a bitch. Acting like I'm a fucking non-issue.'

Bridgestone was an officer of the Organization(which Watt was also a part of). And setting aside his influence, his abilities as a vampire were formidable.

But the fact that he had looked his nose down on the city—no, its mayor—infuriated Watt.

The fact that the intruder had looked down on him while simultaneously showing respect for Gerhardt von Waldstein enraged him. It was nauseating and vexing.

He spent a moment turning over this emotion in the pit of his stomach, before eventually breaking out into a grin. A cold and apathetic smile, which was at the same time disturbing. A perfect look for a petty villain.

'Right. Since when was I this much of a pussy? I'm not gonna shrink back that easily.'

The cell phone in his pocket began to vibrate. He took it out, noting that the call was from a member of the city council. The fact that the name belonged to someone he wasn't on particularly good terms with tipped him off to the identity of the true caller. He took the call.

"It's me."

<...We were interrupted earlier, but I will have you answer my question from before.>

The voice undoubtedly belonged to the councilman to whom the name belonged, but the words were coming from Zygmunt.

But Watt could not be more casual about the continuation of their conversation.

"Sure. Let's do this."

<...What?>

The voice on the other end shook slightly, as though Zygmunt was taken by surprise.

Delighting in his enemy's show of shock, Watt put on a snide grin and said,

"So you wanna know the name of the human Relic von Waldstein's crazy about? Look for—"

†

A beach on the island of Growerth.

'I wonder what time it is.'

The young man in the armor thought to himself, standing on the deserted beach.

Rudi Wenders, the uninvited guest, looked up at the darkening skies and began to walk toward the harbor to find his fellow Eater, Theresia Riefenstahl.

Though he risked being found by the werewolves from earlier that day, he was reasonably certain that they would not all be traveling together.

'Taking care of two or three of them at a time won't be a problem.'

He was not boasting in his own powers or being overconfident. He reached that conclusion through and objective analysis of the movements of the werewolves from before.

Rudi knew that he was strong.

It was not a matter of pride, but a fact of reality and the source of his confidence.

His faith in his own power was what sustained him.

It was all to make Theodosius M. Waldstein suffer for what he had done—for taking away everything his childhood self had held dear.

"Hey! What's that?"

"Maybe he's performing at the festival!"

Rudi heard a pair of voices from behind him. He finally came to his senses.

He turned around with surprising fluidity for a man in a suit of armor, and found himself looking down upon a pair of children around ten years of age.

They were probably siblings or childhood friends. Two pairs of curious eyes looked up at the fantastic suit of armor.

'Brings back memories.'

The children reminded him of himself and Theresia when they were around that age.

Curiosity killed the cat, as the old saying went. And if cats were killed for their curiosity, there was nothing strange about humans having their families and loved ones massacred for the same crime.

If only their childhood selves had never entertained that curiosity.

If only they hadn't thought of exploring the woods.

If only they had never encountered that accursed vampire.

And... if only he had never thought of befriending that vampire.

Although he knew that there was no point in debating what could have been, the other life that he could have led—a life full of normalcy and peace—refused to leave his thoughts. Perhaps, he wondered to himself, he could try his hand at a new life once his vengeance was complete.

As he lost himself in his near-delusional dreams, the little boy looked up at him and said,

"...I found you!"

"...?"

The little girl continued where the boy left off, an eerie chill in her voice.

"What are you still doing here?"

"Theresia's already on her way to the castle, you know."

The boy, who was a complete stranger, knew Theresia's name. Rudi thought for a moment that the children might be Theo's allies, but he did not sense any vampiric presence from them.

But he soon took note of their strangely blank gazes and realized what was happening to them.

"Zygmunt. It's you."

"Nope! We're Zygmunt's Leaves. We've both been subjugated, that's all."

"Ah. I get it."

The two children were already infected by Zygmunt's blood.

Zygmunt was the self-proclaimed 'Branch', and the subjugated humans were known as 'Leaves'. The Branch was a different person each time Rudi met Zygmunt, but he did not know the specifics of how the ability worked. It would be a lie to say that he was not curious, but at the moment he could not care less about it.

"Pass on a message to Zygmunt for me, okay?"

Though Rudi had no time to assist Zygmunt and the others now, if he wanted to meet up with Theresia, he would have to go to the castle as their orders dictated.

But the subjugated children giggled as though they had seen through him already.

"We already passed it on!"

"Our eyes and ears belong to Zygmunt."

"And it looks like you've already met the girl."

"The sister of your target today."

His target's sister—

It took a moment for the thought to register, but Rudi finally realized that this 'sister' was probably the vampire he attacked in the harbor earlier. His eyes snapped open as he interrogated the two children.

"What's that supposed to mean. Don't tell me... is Waldstein our target this time?"

"That's right." The little boy replied. The girl continued where he left off, cheerfully providing Rudi with more information.

"But he's not the Waldstein you're looking for."

The children were little more than clockwork dolls moving at Zygmunt's command. They spoke one after another in full sync as they revealed everything to Rudi.

"Didn't you know, Rudi? The castle you're going to is called Waldstein Castle."

"And our target today is a relative of the Waldstein vampire you're looking for. Oh! I get it! Maybe Melhilm never told you about it because he didn't want the two of you to charge onto the island without orders!"

"And who knows if any of them know where your target's hiding?"

"Maybe you should ask while you're doing your job! Ask the Waldstein prince and princess!"

"...That's right! We dispatched you two here because we're going up against the Waldsteins today!"

"You should be thanking us!"

The repeated mention of the Waldstein name fanned the flames of anger and anxiety in Rudi. He opened his mouth to say something—anything—to expel that emotion.

But the children cut him off.

Their tone was different. It was a 180 from the voices they were using earlier. It was enough to push back everything Rudi was about to spill.

"Remember Comrade Caldimir's words, Rudi. Become our hunting dogs, and we shall assist you and your plan for revenge."

"And now is the time. That is all that matters."

There was a monster named Zygmunt living in the innocent eyes of the children. There wasn't a drop of emotion in their voices, which were instead filled with a chilling force of will.

As Rudi registered that fact, the boy suddenly began to look around as though he was lost.

"Huh? Was I... saying something?"

"Huh? What is it?"

"Maybe I'm just imagining things. Oh well. Hey, Mister! You're doing something with that armor for the festival, right? I can't wait to see!"

"Hey, we have to go now! The festival's starting!"

There was nothing resembling the terrifying emptiness in the children's voices now. Zygmunt had given them back their senses. There was probably nothing left of the previous exchange in their memories.

But the subjugation still continued.

If Zygmunt gave them the order to die—no, if Zygmunt so much as thought about the children killing themselves, they would probably begin strangling themselves on the spot. The image came to Rudi with frightening clarity as he projected the image of his childhood self onto the children.

'Though I doubt Zygmunt would go that far...'

He was told that Zygmunt would only restrict the target's movements. Rudi was supposed to find out the details as Theresia transported him from the harbor to the castle, but things had spiraled out of control after his encounter with the vampire and the werewolves.

'But that... wasn't the only thing that went wrong.'

The exceedingly ordinary human boy who had stood between him and the vampire.

If Rudi were serious, he could have twisted off the boy's neck with ease.

But the boy's actions were engraved into Rudi's memories, and as he unconsciously compared him to his own childhood self, he found his senses filling with endless unease.

'But it's almost over now. I'll take away everything Theo holds dear... the Waldstein family, his friends... And in the end, I'll kill him. Then... it'll all be finished. I have to finish it.'

'But for who?

'For myself. That's all. Even if I kill him... my parents and my friends... and my sister... none of them will come back.'

'Yeah. I'm just doing this to satisfy myself.'

Rudi laughed alone, cutting himself down in his own thoughts.

He was not rejecting himself in his laughter.

He was laughing because he was picturing the acts of revenge he would soon take upon Theodosius.

He would make that fiendish vampire feel the very same despair and fear he had felt in the past.

'I... will become Theodosius.'

At that moment, the image of the boy from before—Michael—flashed through Rudi's thoughts once more. Anger welled up within him like a volcano, but he ground his teeth without knowing why he was so outraged.

The boy and the girl left Rudi on the beach, leaving him with these painful words:

"Bye, Mister Armor!"

"Do your best at the festival!"

Rudi could neither wave his hand nor respond to the children.

Even the act of recalling his old self was repulsive to him. He could not bring himself to watch the children depart.

Despair and hatred continued to sink their roots deep into his heart.

†

An underground conference hall, somewhere in Paris.

"It's all in the palm of my hands. And if all goes well, I'll even be able to capture Relic on the side. I'd like to do that. If at all possible."

"I see nothing but greed in that head of yours." Laetitia said, chiding her fellow officer in a strangely giddy tone.

Caldimir, on the other hand, made his downcast mood clear.

"And yet... our greatest miscalculation is now headed straight for Growerth..."

"You mean Garde." Laetitia said, frowning.

"Yes... Garde Ritzberg, the Black Gravekeeper! That demonic vampire, wandering battlefields for centuries to devour the dead and steal away death from corpses to control them! That sick necromancer! I still can't bring myself to admit that someone as revolting as Garde is one of the Organization's strongest members! Laetitia, you know what happened during the Great War. That sicko zombified every corpse on the front lines, even though no one was left alive to fight! And made the corpses start another battle! For the sole purpose of deriving amusement! For trifles! Someone like that should be at the top of our blacklist, but no one can defeat Garde! It's a relief Gerhardt managed to convince that idiot, but that bothers me even more! Gerhardt's left the Organization, but Garde still worships the ground he walks on!"

It was an overly dramatic way of describing his fellow vampire, but Caldimir was not exaggerating when he discussed Garde's feats. Nor did Laetitia doubt the veracity of his claims. She knew very well the kind of vampire Garde Ritzberg was.

"If that idiot tells Gerhardt what I'm planning, everything will have been for naught! And if Garde decides to go crazy and ends up fighting Zygmunt head-to-head... There won't be a Europe left anymore." Caldimir said, as though the end of the world was nigh. Laetitia smiled faintly.

"That's not a problem."

"...What?"

"Growerth is a thousand kilometers from Paris, and Garde just left the room. It's as simple as ending things before your little problem gets to the island. Call back Zygmunt and Melhilm before the inevitable rampage."

"...Rudi and Theresia won't *listen* to orders once they run into Theodosius." Caldimir said. Laetitia's smile grew icy.

"Then they die. Simple as that."

†

The outskirts of Paris. Charles de Gaulle Airport.

"Amazing! I got a seat on the plane to Hamburg! I did!"

The sun was setting on the airport. A vampire was sitting in one of the airplanes that were preparing to take off.

The figure's face was wrapped up in layers upon layers of black bandages, their wide-open right eye being the only feature exposed to the world. The rest of their body was also wrapped up in bandages, making them look very much like a black mummy. The only exposed parts of their body was their shoulder-length hair, which stuck straight into the air, and the area around their neck and bellybutton. Some might have been drawn to that strange appearance, but to be frank, it was difficult to even tell if the vampire was a man or a woman.

How had Garde Ritzberg gotten through airport security? That was still a mystery, but they were now sitting in a seat in first class.

"Mm... to Hamburg? Is it less than two hours to Hamburg?" They wondered to themselves, falling into thought.

It would not take very long to reach Growerth from Hamburg. Although they would not make it in time for the opening ceremony of the Carnale Festival, Garde did not seem to care one bit.

After all, they did not even know that tourists from all over the world were gathering on the island that day—the day that marked the beginning of the festivities to come.

"I wonder how many people Zygmunt's killed? How many?"

The more fresh corpses there were, the more toys there were available for Garde to enjoy.

Just like Caldimir, Garde cared nothing for the lives of the people on the island.

†

An underground conference hall, somewhere in Paris.

Caldimir hung his head in fatigue, having revealed everything.

The conference hall was filled with silence for a moment, but Laetitia flashed him a grin of pure ice and shattered the stillness.

"You're a sick bastard, Caldimir."

"...That's all you have to say?"

"Yes. Your allies aren't even allies in this plan of yours. I was going to give you props for going so far to get your hands on Valdred, but that wasn't the truth. You just want to get back at Gerhardt von Waldstein."

"What?! How dare you?!" Caldimir cried. But Laetitia smothered his yells with the depth and weight of her own voice.

"There are countless Organization members who could get Valdred to you more efficiently and with even greater secrecy. Zygmunt and Melhilm could pull it off on their own."

Being a fellow officer, Laetitia knew well the powers Zygmunt possessed. That was why she was capable of such a cutting critique of Caldimir's excesses.

"Deploying Rudi and Theresia had nothing to do with increasing your chances at success. You sent them there to destroy the peaceful ecosystem the viscount's created on that island. Talk, Caldimir. You're not really interested in getting back Valdred or Relic. You wanted the viscount to get involved in Rudi and Theresia's plans for revenge. Val and Relic are nothing but excuses to you."

One little clue—the fact of the excessive power allocated for the mission—was enough for Laetitia to form a conclusion that she could rub in Caldimir's face.

But Caldimir withdrew his anxiety, looking up with determination filling his endlessly cold eyes.

"...Hmph. And what will you do? Betray me? No... would you denounce me for acting against the Organization's interests?"

"Don't be a slimeball politician, Caldimir. But not to worry. I may have the viscount's email address, and Dorothy and the twins' cell phone numbers, but I won't contact them."

Caldimir did not ask why. He had known Laetitia long enough to understand her reasoning. That was also the reason he told her everything.

"Hahahahahahahahahahahahaha!"

Laetitia finally broke free of the iron mask she had maintained all that time and burst out laughing like a madwoman.

The laughter filled every corner of the conference room. Each and every wave echoed against the walls and joined yet more, making it sound as though the room was filled with an audience.

"Hah... This is too interesting! And I can't even join in on this commotion! I hate, despise, loathe myself! Why can't I see the outcome with my own two eyes? All I can do is imagine the chaos, and it's killing me!"

The composed soldier from moments earlier was gone. Laetitia was wearing the face of a cartoonish dictator descending into madness.

"Hm. I thought you were supposed to be friends with Gerhardt. Not going to offer him a helping hand?"

"There's no merit in helping him. Or are you suggesting that there's something more pleasant than the sweetness of the suffering of others?" Laetitia said, grinning fiendishly. But in contrast, her voice grew more and more impassioned by the second. "Rudi doesn't know a thing. Our loyal hound Nidhogg knows nothing whatsoever. Now *this* is going to be fun! If only I could be at Gowerth myself to witness that moment of despair personally!"

"Then why not go, Laetitia? And while you're at it, go take care of Garde for me." Caldimir said, but Laetitia shook her head.

"...Unfortunately, I have a dentist's appointment tomorrow morning."

It was a strangely human excuse for a vampire. Caldimir frowned.

"A... dentist's appointment?"

"You heard me."

"Wha...?"

Caldimir stared blankly, mouth agape.

"Cavities. I'm getting a dental impression done tomorrow."

"What?"

"I never told you, but for some reason, I can't regenerate damage from tooth decay. Maybe it's just my image."

Laetitia cradled her face in her hands, her gravitas and madness disappearing in an instant. From the way she behaved now, she looked merely like a high school student dressing up as a soldier.

"After all... I'm the kind of person who'd pick deliciously sweet honey over showing gratitude to her master." She said plainly, as though that was reason enough for her to abandon Gerhardt.

"I drank too much sweet blood. It's surprisingly hard to find blood that's high in sugar but low in fat." She said, turning and walking away. "Also... I'm satisfied just imagining misfortune and disaster. I know that seeing it in person won't satisfy me as much as I expected of it."

"...Why?" Caldimir wondered.

"If Gerhardt von Waldstein is involved, then I know things won't turn out as badly as I wish they would. So all I can do is take pleasure from a catastrophe I dream up for myself."

With that, Laetitia G. Aztanduja, the Orange Magic Lantern, left the conference hall without a sound.

Caldimir was left alone with his anxiety once more.

"Tch... Gerhardt this, Gerhardt that. All of them. Every last one of them! How could someone who left the Organization have so much charisma and influence? What about me is so inferior to him?!"

Laetitia had given him the answer earlier, but Caldimir had put it out of his mind. He angrily glanced down at the chunks of wood sticking into his body.

"Hm?"

And he finally remembered his state of being.

"Wha...? Wait! I forgot! Laetitia! Stop! You forgot to get me off this wall! Laetitia! I, uh, mean... Ms. Aztanduja! Come back, please! If any of the Organization's underlings catch sight of me like this... No! Laetitia! Laetitia!"

His screams echoed meaninglessly through the conference hall. The man who plotted misfortune upon Gerhardt was served misfortune in turn ahead of time.

Listening to her rescuer's screams from outside the hall, Laetitia repeated herself:

"I'm the kind of person who'd pick deliciously sweet honey over showing gratitude to her master."

The woman in military wear giggled, enjoying the sound of screams coming from behind her.

She then remembered the island ruled by her old friend.

Were the seeds of misfortune beginning to sprout? Or had they already grown into disaster and despair? And what if Gerhardt wasn't present on the island today? If the Master of Night—the master of the vampires—was absent?

Her thoughts went from conjecture to fantasy as she imagined catastrophe upon the island.

But at that moment, the cell phone in her breast pocket began to vibrate.

Annoyed at the interruption of her daydreams, she looked down at the screen. But her frown soon changed into a grin.

Her eyes glinted as she took hold of yet a new seed of misfortune. She continued walking down the hall, bringing the phone to her ear.

Her heart was pounding in anticipation of the imminent tragedy.

†

"...I wonder how much longer Hilda's going to take..."

The anxious vampire in the hospital room looked out the window and at the clear night sky, which was slowly beginning to sparkle with starlight.

The chatter of the festival-goers was such that it threatened to reach the heavens. But in spite of the beautiful and comforting sight, the young vampire—Relic von Waldstein—was overcome by an ominous feeling.

He tried to hold back his fears by saying out loud the name of his beloved.

"Hilda... How am I going to explain things to her once she arrives? I guess I should start by saying Michael's life isn't in any danger..."

But nothing could overcome the looming fear. Saying her name only made things worse.

The boy had yet to realize.

Hilda herself was the reason for his fear.

And his fears were about to become a reality.

"She's really late..."

The source of his fears manifested itself in the sound of a knock.

"Hilda...?"

Relic opened the door without so much as a hint of hesitation, too rushed to be gentlemanly by any stretch of the definition. But standing outside was not his beloved childhood friend, but one of the werewolves who lived in Waldstein Castle.

Several werewolves were still camped out in the hallway out of concern for Michael, but there was something else in their eyes now—a look of confusion and worry.

"...? Is something the matter?"

"No, well..."

The werewolf at the door was bald and wearing sunglasses. He was the very picture of a biker's underling, currently in human form.

"Did you notice? It's pretty quiet in here..."

"Pardon?" Relic said. The werewolf's nose twitched.

"And... this hospital feels... empty."

"What do you mean...?"

Though Relic could make a reasonable guess as to what the werewolf was saying, he found himself asking for clarification in an attempt to stave off the inevitable.

The werewolf's answer confirmed his worst fears.

"...I don't smell as many humans as before."

Relic finally turned his attention to the building. It was eerily quiet.

"We can still smell some patients and doctors, but it's like... there's less doctors around than usual. Even considering the festival, I mean. And it's not time for them to switch shifts, either." The werewolf said, surprisingly articulate for someone of his appearance.

Relic's fears ballooned as he headed for the reception desk on the first floor.

Even as he descended the stairs, the eerie silence clung to him like layers of cobwebs. It was a sickening feeling, as though the very air was filled with a foreign substance.

But as he headed downstairs, Relic hoped with all he had that he was just imagining things.

The sight that greeted him, however, sent alarm bells ringing in his head.

"Ah..."

There were several people manning the reception desk, but they were engaged in a furious and desperate battle against the flood of incoming phone calls. From the pieces of conversation Relic managed to pick up, he could tell that some of the doctors and nurses had gone missing.

But what triggered the swell of terror in his heart lay somewhere else entirely.

There was a sign-in sheet at the reception desk, at the bottom of which was written the name of someone he knew well.

[Hilda Dietrich]

It felt as though all the blood in his body suddenly swelled backwards though his systems.

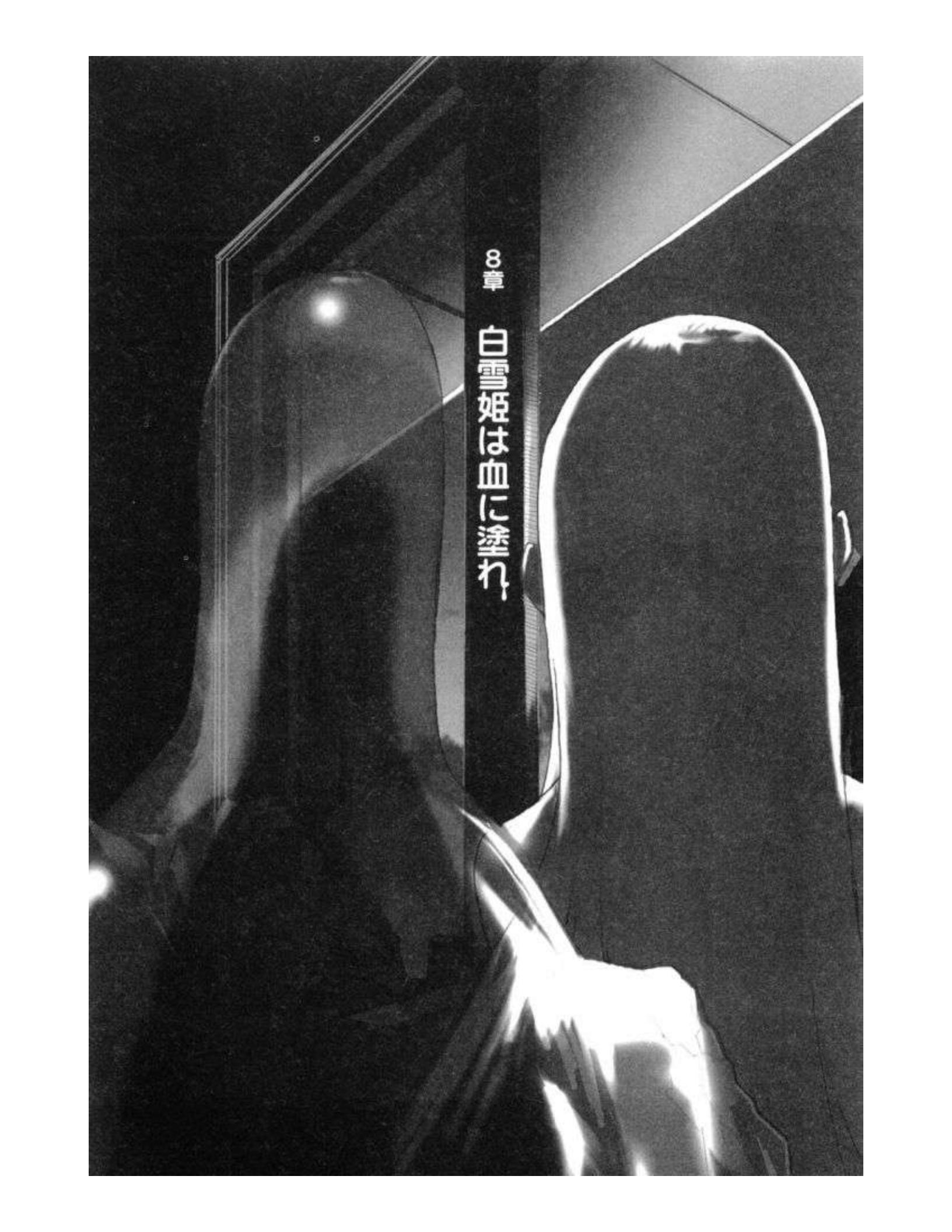
The name of the girl he loved was clearly written on the sheet.

But she was nowhere to be found.

At that moment, the sun finally disappeared over the horizon in the west.

There was a chilling moment of silence as the hour of vampires commenced.

Night had begun.



8章 白雪姫は血に塗れ

Chapter 8 - Snow White is Dyed in Red, and...

Waldstein Castle Parlor.

"It's delightful to see you again, Viscount—I mean, Gerhardt!"

[It's been too many years since our last meeting, my most lovely fiancée. It gladdens me to again behold you in all your graceful beauty!]

The lovers delighted in their reunion, surrounded by vampire maids and werewolves. Everyone but the couple looked on in stunned silence at the sudden nature of Dorothy's visit

There was nothing surprising about the viscount receiving a visitor. But what surprised everyone was the fact that he had introduced the woman as his fiancée.

Anyone who wasn't used to the viscount's appearance, however, would have been lost for words for a different reason entirely.

The woman had nearly-transparent white skin and long white hair that shimmered like freshly fallen snow. Unlike the white hairs that cropped up on the heads of aged humans, Dorothy's locks were soft as silk. Though one might have feared that the juxtaposition of her hair against her skin made it seem like she was wearing a wig, Dorothy's features blended together in pleasant harmony; a beautiful sight to behold.

With the exception of her pupils, even her eyes—not a blood vessel in sight—were a pristine white. The tongue that flashed between her light pink lips looked even redder in contrast.

Even her clothing was uniformly white. Its simple design was straight out of a fairy tale, from the wardrobe of a princess in a land far, far away.

She was a veritable snow-elf, anyone would think from appearances alone. And there was nothing out-of-place about this judgement. Dorothy was like the personification of snow itself.

The problem was the creature that held her in its embrace.

The bloody viscount who needed no introduction had somehow fashioned his body into something resembling human form. It was an appearance that would be most appropriate in an old B-movie.

Yet Snow White showed no reservations about making physical contact with the creature.

It was a nightmarish sight, as though the princess were being devoured by a red mass of slime.

And how in the world had she embraced the viscount in the first place, when his entire body was in liquid form? From the fact that the blood was not staining her clothing, it seemed that there was a telekinetic membrane of sorts covering Gerhardt's entire body.

The happy couple spent a moment in sweet embrace. But the maids, finally able to speak again, bombarded them with questions.

"Master?!"

"You never said anything about a fiancée, sir!"

The parlor grew more and more chaotic by the second, filled with the maids' voices.

"When is the wedding scheduled to take place, Master?!"

"We can't make preparations unless you tell us about it first, sir!"

"Please don't even think of eloping, sir! You have your reputation to think about!"

"You're always so fickle, Master! Please try to be more considerate of our duties!"

"I'll begin the preparations right away, sir. Please give me the names and number of relatives you will be inviting to the ceremony. An approximate number is acceptable."

The onslaught finally came to an end with a statement from a particularly composed maid. The viscount awkwardly began to write out a response in the air.

Most of his body, of course, was still maintaining the shape of a man. Although he was no longer embracing his fiancée, Gerhardt was still holding her pristine white hand.

[Ah, my sincerest apologies. My fiery love and yearning seem to have gotten the better of me.]

He made a gesture like he was scratching his head, pointless though it was.

In any event, it was clear that he was ready to explain everything. The maids, the werewolves, and the suit-clad vampire called 'Mage' surrounded the happy couple in a semicircle.

Mage spoke on behalf of the others in the parlor.

"Master Gerhardt. We'd be grateful if you could introduce us properly..."

The viscount began weaving his response in the air, in both German and Japanese out of consideration for Mage.

[Ah, a most wise suggestion. Then allow me to introduce you in all proper form! This is Dorothy Nifas. Her surname means 'snowflake' in Greek¹.]

"Dorothy Nifas. It's a pleasure to meet you, everyone." Dorothy said with an elegant bow. She moved with fluid grace and regal bearing. "I'm terribly sorry about the confusion. Gerhardt can be quite forgetful sometimes. To think he hadn't spoken a word about me! I suppose some things never change."

¹ Dorothy's surname is pronounced *Nipasu* in the Japanese version, and the viscount claims that it means 'snowstorm' or 'blizzard'. Greek Anon has pointed out that this does not seem accurate, though *Nifas* is a word meaning 'snowflake'. I decided to go with the more authentic *Nifas* for this translation.

In spite of her ladylike looks, Dorothy's voice was full of energy and enthusiasm. She even openly (but lovingly) criticized Gerhardt without a moment's hesitation.

[Haha! Indeed, they do not. Ah, I had convinced myself, it seems, that I had disclosed the fact of our engagement earlier. Now that I think on it, I'd thus far only told Grandmother Job and Doctor!]

Although there was little in the way of apology in the viscount's words, it was clear from his pulsating body that he was deeply embarrassed.

He then continued his thought from earlier, completing his introduction of Dorothy.

[Dorothy and I grew close in the past, when I was still affiliated with the Organization. In fact, it was Dorothy who suggested the formation of the Organization. It was also she who nominated me as an officer of the Organization.] He wrote nostalgically. Dorothy looked away, also looking slightly embarrassed. A hint of pink stained her white cheeks, turning the elf human for but an instant.

The occupants of the parlor were fully convinced as to Dorothy's good intentions. The greeting would end without a fuss. But Mage decided to point out something that had been bothering him for quite some time.

"Umm. Master Gerhardt."

[Hm? What might be the matter?]

"It feels as though... It's been getting colder."

Although the question had come out of nowhere, no one could disagree that the temperature had indeed taken a dip. Everyone sensed the change, which seemed to be originating from Dorothy.

[Ah! It seems I had forgotten one very important point in t!]

The viscount's letters began to grow disorganized as he continued.

[Dorothy uses telekinesis to control matter around herself, but she is unable to move large objects.]

"M-Master Gerhardt?"

As the viscount's movements grew stiff, the servants addressed him with great concern. But Gerhardt continued to write in the air.

[In exchange, she is capable of halting the movements of small objects. She can slow down the movements of molecules, for example! In essence, this means she is capable of lowering the temperature. But it seems to be a difficult ability to control; she unfortunately controls down the temperature even when sheeeeeeee...]

His writing stopped.

Mage turned to the viscount's main body, still in the shape of a man, and noticed something.

The viscount was not sloshing in liquid form as he usually did. His entire body was a solid, and white frost was beginning to set on the surface.

"ACK! Master Gerhardt is frozen!"

Mage's scream seemed to have finally alerted Dorothy as to her fiancée's frozen state. She quickly let go of his hand and embraced him in an effort to warm up his body.

"Oh dear! I'm so sorry, Gerhardt! You never froze so quickly in the past! Please, wake up!"

Her embrace seemed to have the opposite effect entirely. The letters floating in the air froze solid, finally falling to the floor.

The letters, a part of the viscount's very body, shattered like glassware.

[My sincerest apologies! My joy at our long-awaited reunion seems to have gotten the better of me!]

The maids had showered him with the contents of the parlor teapot, and the werewolves had rubbed his body with cloth with all their might. The viscount finally returned to liquid form, gaining freedom once more.

[Ah, yes! As I recall, this is far from the first time I lost consciousness after embracing Dorothy!]

"She's your natural enemy, Master! How in the world did you get engaged?!" The occupants of the parlor cried in shock. But the viscount twisted his body abashedly and wrote out a response.

[...Do you not agree... that a difference in temperature is such a trivial thing in the face of true love?]

"This? A 'difference'? Master Gerhardt! It's closer to being an impenetrable wall!" Mage said pointedly.

[Hahahahaha! Now, let us return to the matter at hand.]

Gerhardt tensed as though waving aside Mage's critique. It his font also changed to a more businesslike one that was used in newspapers.

[What did you mean, Dorothy, when you said you had come to protect Relic?]

"...My goodness, I'd completely lost track of time! Gerhardt, I sent you an email earlier. Didn't you read it?"

[Ah, I've yet to check my inbox. I am sorry to say that I've been terribly busy today, what with all the guests to entertain...]

Although it was difficult to see a visual connection between the pool of blood and the internet, the viscount was actually skilled enough with computers that he could surf the web freely. He was able to use the same telekinesis that moved his body to use things like the

keyboard and the mouse. The fact that he was not limited to ten fingers also meant that he was the quickest typist on the island.

But even the viscount was unable to communicate using telephones. Email was about the only way to contact him.

[I already know of Melhilm's arrival, but was even Caldimir involved? And if you've come to protect Relic...]

"Um... Master!" One of the maids said, remembering something. "I'm terribly sorry, sir. Miss Nifas's arrival was so sudden I couldn't report to you immediately, but there was an incident concerning Miss Ferret earlier today."

[Hm? Some urgent business, might I ask?]

"Yes, Master. And... I believe Miss Nifas may also be involved..." The maid trailed off, looking slightly suspicious of Dorothy.

[...That is enough of doubt, now. Mark my words—Dorothy is entirely trustworthy.]

"Oh, of course! My apologies, Miss." The maid said, having been read like a book.

"Not at all. Please don't let it bother you. But from what you're saying, something must have already happened." Dorothy said, her expression darkening as she guessed at what might have occurred.

The maid once more bowed her head apologetically and reported to everyone in the parlor:

"Yes. It was earlier today, Master, at the harbor. Miss Ferret—"

†

At the same time, Waldstein Castle. The laboratory.

"Do~ctor! Do~~~ctor!"

The laboratory was built in an artificial alcove at the end of the caverns. Its entrance was equipped with all kinds of modern security features, a far cry from the natural environment outside.

A girl dressed like a jester was rapping on the door and calling at the top of her lungs, accompanied by a group of murmuring vampires.

"This is a golden opportunity, guys."

"Yeah. Now that Selim and Val are aboveground, Doctor and Professor are like helpless little sparrows with their wings torn off."

"You mean helpless little bats. Vampires, remember?"

"But don't bats die if you pull off their wings?"

"Heh heh heh... In the realm of Night, the punishment for disrespecting your elders... is death."

"Bout time we teach 'em to fear true vampires."

"Let's show them what we're made of!"

The vampires grew more and more dramatic in their rally. The jester suddenly stopped knocking on the door.

"You know, you know? I heard Doctor's actually really strong, too! Not as much as Relic, but he's still really strong! Granny Job told me! He's probably a lot stronger than the werewolves, too! You guys wouldn't stand a chance even in your next lives! Tee hee!"

The vampires gulped in unison and exchanged glances.

Then they amended their prior claims as though nothing had happened.

"Heh heh heh... The punishment for denying us our well-deserved pay... is death."

"Bout time we teach 'em to fear part-timers."

"Let's show 'em what unemployed people are made of!"

"N-E-E-T! N-E-E-T!"

Ignoring her friends' ineffectual threats, the jester once more turned to the door.

She slowly brought her skinny right arm to the door, and turned her body into fog. Even the clothing she wore and the part of the door that was in contact with her costume followed in the transfiguration.

The jester's form quickly grew faint like a mirage as she slowly turned into a thick, colorful fog. The fog flowed in through the gap she left in the door, and reformed into the clown on the other side.

The missing chunk of the door was reformed in her right hand. It hit the ground with a thud.

The vampires gawked at the hole in the door, which was partly melted like a piece of glass that had been attacked with a blowtorch.

"Whoa... sweet."

"Since when did you know how to do that?"

"That's pretty boss, yo."

"You're a beast!"

The jester looked mystified at the vampires' reactions.

"Huh? ...Oh, I get it now! I totally get it! You guys had no idea, did you? You don't know!"

"...About what?"

"Last year, silly! When you guys weren't here! Relic almost turned this entire island into fog and bats!"

For a moment, the vampires did not register the meaning of the jester's claim. But once the understanding hit them, they froze.

"...You're kidding."

"Nope! Not one bit! It's because Relic's so strong that Master Watt can't give up on getting his hands on his powers, you know? Isn't Master Watt dreamy?" She cooed, her eyes sparkling.

A single look at the jester's eyes was enough to fully convince the long-lived vampires of Relic's superiority.

"...Remind me to never pick a fight with Relic."

"Or with Doctor."

"Or with Selim."

"Or the viscount when he's going on about economics."

"...In other words, we shouldn't pick a fight with anyone."

"Awesome!" "We're a buncha pacifists now!" "It's like I'm holding the fate of the world in my own two hands!" "Once our pacifistic hands finally curl into fists, our true power will be unleashed!" "Enemies of Earthlings appear before us... And they're all hot babes!" "What? I like handsome, buff guys." "Proposal rejected. Anyway, an ill-fated romance is a given." "Tragedy approaches!" "The power to turn tragedy into triumph... That is my true power!"

"Heh heh heh... We're pretty amazing, that's what we are!"

The jester ignored her friends, who were going further and further off-track, and sauntered into the laboratory.

"Do~ctor! Profe~ssor! Today's the day of the festival, you know? You know? It only comes once a year! You missed it last year, so you just have to make it this time! Um... if you don't go, you might get killed! So let's *all* go together and cheer on Master Watt!" She hollered, stepping further inside without a hint of hesitation. From her comfortable behavior, it seemed that she had visited the lab before.

She stopped before the entrance of the room where the duo usually worked, and slammed open the door.

"Doctor... Oh? Hey, it's Professor! ...Huh?"

Upon glimpsing the state of the room, the jester tilted her head in confusion.

The room was not particularly messy. In fact, it was organized more neatly than it usually was. The countless monitors mounted on the walls displayed footage from all over the island in real time, and there was a familiar white coffin in the center of the room.

There were a pair of arms attached to the coffin, and caterpillar tracks were supporting it from below. It was the kindly and energetic vampire(?) known as Professor.

For some reason, her arms were hanging limp behind her and her caterpillar tracks remained so still the jester almost thought they had rusted. And most startlingly, the speakers that usually played Professor's cutesy voice to listeners were silent.

The lid of the coffin was open. Inside was a humanoid skeleton.

It was almost a horrifying sight to behold, but the jester only frowned and wondered to herself:

"Hm? What happened here? Did she get into a teensy fight with Doctor?"

The jester thought for a moment. And once she heard the sound of the other vampires coming down the hall, she slowly shut the lid of the coffin.

Professor's mechanical arms sprang to life and her caterpillar tracks began whirring once more.

The coffin shook much like a wet dog might, and a moment later Professor's childlike voice crackled from the speakers attached to her arm joints.

<Eeek! Thank you so much for closing my lid, Miss Clown! By any chance have you seen Doctor?>

If Professor knew that her lid was opened and closed, she had probably not simply fallen asleep. She quickly came to her senses, looking around for her partner.

But Doctor was nowhere to be found. Professor turned to the monitors set up on the wall, but still she could not locate him.

<Oh no, oh no... What do I do...?>

"Say, did something happen?" The jester asked. At that very moment, the other vampires burst into the room.

"Hey, you are here!"

"Why'd you pretend you weren't?!"

"Heh. You don't even make any money, Professor. We don't have any business with you. And you can't even sell yourself to make cash, huh?"

"Forget this creep and hand over the Doc, Prof!"

The vampires furiously demanded Doctor's presence. Professor responded in a trembling voice,

<Doctor... Doctor's disappeared somewhere!>

Her mechanical arms touched the top of her coffin as her caterpillar tracks shook. From her gesture and tone, it seemed that she was crying.



As everyone came to the same conclusion, the speakers projected the voice of a weeping girl.

<Uwa... waaaaaaaaahhh...>

"Eek! Don't cry, Professor!" The jester said, quickly patting the side of the coffin to console her. At the same time, she turned her head and shot the other vampires a glare.

"You meanies! How could you make a coffin cry like that? How could you?! You're inhuman!"

Though her choice of words could be taken as nonsensical, the jester's expression was the picture of gravity.

"Whoa, don't get mad at us."

"Making a coffin cry, huh? That's definitely inhuman."

"In more ways than one."

"Back to the point! What's this about Doctor being missing?"

"Yeah! That's the real issue here, right?!"

The vampires collectively tried to alleviate the weight of their guilt by listening to Professor's side of the story. Although their attempts at sympathy were awkward at best, Professor accepted them and swallowed her tears(or the sound of them, at least).

She explained how Doctor had been watching something through the monitors with a terribly grave expression.

How he suddenly told her his name as though saying goodbye, and how he flipped her lid open.

How he disappeared, saying something along the lines of 'get some rest and stay behind so you don't get involved', as she remained there unable to move or speak.

But Professor neglected to mention one final thing—his final words to her.

"But you know, I'm not worthy of salvation. Not now, not ever."

Such ominous words.

It was, in some ways, a will of sorts. Professor could sense the weight of something terrible in Doctor's unusually childlike tone. She could not bring herself to repeat it to the vampires, for fear that the burden nesting in his words would only grow heavier.

She knew that it would be better to discuss it with everyone.

But the soul within the coffin was affected by her emotions. She hesitated to put a voice to Doctor's words.

The vampires, with no understanding of Professor's emotional state, stood in a huddle and whispered amongst themselves.

"What's going on here, d'you think? Where'd Doc go?"

"You know, we just came in from the caverns. Isn't it weird? If he left the lab, we'd have run straight into him."

The vampire made an obvious point, but no one could find Doctor in the laboratory. The freeloaders crowded around the monitors that displayed images from inside the lab, but there was nothing moving on the screens.

"In other words, he turned into bats or fog and went aboveground while hiding from us."

"But why?! Does he really hate us that much?"

"Hold on. D'you think he went to get some cash from the bank to pay us with?" One of the vampires said with a triumphant grin. But Professor shook her body from side to side, rejecting the idea.

<We have plenty of money here in the safe...>

"Then hand it over now!" The vampire replied, quickly straying from the subject.

The jester shot him a murderous glare.

"Uh... right. Uh... man, I'm worried 'bout Doc." He stammered quickly.

The jester's eyes returned to normal as she turned to Professor.

"But why is he hiding from us? Maybe to keep us out of something dangerous?" She wondered in concern.

<I think that must be it.> Professor said feebly.

The jester thought for a moment with a frown creasing her brow. But soon, she stood up with a surprisingly determined smile.

"It's settled, then! Let's all go help him!"

<What...?>

Though her body was incapable of showing expressions, something like shock filled Professor's voice at the fact that the jester would help Doctor instead of merely search for him.

"I don't really get what's going on, but Doctor might be in trouble, right? Right? So let's go! We have to help him!" The jester said matter-of-factly. Professor swung her arms in panic.

<N-not at all! You were all on your way to the festival, weren't you?! Please, you don't have to go to all this trouble for our sakes!>

But the jester refused to back down. She grinned innocently and turned to the other vampires.

"It's totally fine! Right, guys?"

"Uh... You askin' us to agree with you?"

The vampires looked quite hesitant. But the jester said confidently, without a moment's hesitation,

"If Doctor left without telling anyone, that must mean he's trying to keep us all safe from something really bad, right? Isn't that really amazing? Isn't that sweet?"

"Hey, that ain't gonna convince us, y'know? Even I know stuff like that never turns out well. When a vampire's got problems, they're usually pretty deep. Bad news all around. And 'sides, we're just here to get our money."

The vampires still seemed quite hesitant to join in the jester's quest.

"Anyway, we ain't friendly enough with Doc to give him charity like that. It's a professional relationship we've got with him, y'know? With cash?"

"Yeah, cash! That's what vampires need more of!"

<Oh!>

The vampires' obsession with money reminded Professor of something.

"What now?"

<Doctor is the only one who can open the safe.>

Ten seconds passed in utter silence. The vampires slowly turned to the jester. Naturally, their eyes were filled with the same greed that had permeated the air when they first saw her use her powers to slip through the laboratory door.

The jester, however, ignored their desperation and grinned impishly, getting to her feet.

"I'm going now! Tee hee!"

"Wait! Hold up! Your Majesty!" One of the vampires cried, using flattery to hold her back. But the jester ignored him and turned herself to fog, leaving the room.

The remaining vampires exchanged glances and sighed loudly. They then headed off to follow the jester.

<Everyone...>

"There's money on the line. What're we supposed to do, ignore it?" One of the vampires said in all honesty. The coffin bowed forward as much as physically possible to show her gratitude.

<*sniffle* Thank you so much! I'll contact you by cell phone if I figure out anything!>

"With those arms?!"

<Thank you! Thank you!>

Not even the vampires' realistic concerns were enough to stop Professor's unending stream of gratitude. They left the room quickly and abashedly.

"Man..."

One of the vampires sighed as the group walked down the hall to the caverns.

"Feels like we're getting in over our heads here."

"Stop talking like that. You're giving me the creeps." Said another. But the first vampire shook his head.

"Y'know... Back when I was in the Organization, I heard rumors about a kid. A boy. And I think... he might be Doctor."

The other vampires frowned at the way their friend circled around the topic. There was something ominous about how vaguely he described things. They responded with questions to try and lighten the mood.

"...What's that s'posed to mean?"

"Never heard anything like that before."

"You're scaring us, man."

"And why didn't you say anything earlier?"

The man paused for a moment. He then spotted the jester walking ahead in the distance, and making sure that no one else was around, whispered to his friends,

"Well, it's not like I was 100% sure it was the same guy. And... it'd be rude to Professor either way..."

The man trailed off, his lighthearted behavior evaporating. He was silent for several seconds, before finally averting his eyes and mumbling as though to himself.

"...I mean... if you think of a prettyboy vampire with silver hair and silver eyes... isn't that a dead ringer for Doc?"

"...True. You never really see hair like that anywhere."

"What was it, ten? Fifteen years ago? Forget if it was Russia or Germany, but remember how a whole bunch of humans in the countryside got massacred or disappeared off the face of the earth?"

The other vampires blinked at the sudden mention of the incident. What could the silver-haired boy have to do with it?

"Thousands of humans went missing or died in a whole bunch of different places... over the course of a year."

"...Come to think of it, I think Mr. Melhilm was running around a lot back then."

"Sure, it was all in different places. Everyone died or disappeared in different circumstances. And humans just thought it was earthquakes or fires and never made the connection. But..."

The vampire was finally becoming more and more specific in his recollections. There was a hint of both curiosity and even a touch of awe in his tone.

"...I heard the culprit was... a kid. A kid who grew up into a vampire. You know Laetitia the Orange? The officer? I heard her talking with another officer in a bar. Looked real excited about it, too. I never saw her laughing like that before, so the whole thing stuck with me. Just how bad was this kid, you know?"

"...Okay. Forget what I said earlier. The silver hair's gotta be a coincidence. And seriously. Thousands of humans? One vampire? No way. We've all heard crazy rumors about the officers. Legends about Black, or stories about Mirror's antics..."

The first vampire, however, refused to let the matter pass.

"Doc said he was twenty-seven. Y'know... his age... it fits perfectly."

"Wait. Hold it. You're talking about a crazy vampire that went around like an idiot killing humans left and right. The Organization should have finished him off ages ago!" Said the lone woman among the group. The other vampires had also been thinking the same thing from the start.

One of the Organization's purposes was to protect vampires from human persecution. That was why flaunting the presence of vampires to human eyes and creating an image of vampires as evil creatures was essentially an act of hostility against the Organization.

"Yeah. There's no way the Organization'd let him off the hook just like that. In other words, he's already one of their targets. But this kid is still alive and kicking."

The first vampire nodded and brought the storm of rumors to stillness with a single sentence.

"In other words, this mass murderer is still at the top of the Organization's blacklist."

9章 悪の化身は微笑みながら



Chapter 9 - Evil Incarnate Puts on a Smile, and...

Waldstein Castle.

Ishibashi said many things as Valdred and Selim led him through the halls of the castle.

He told them that Melhilm had come to this island with a pair of Eaters and a vampire who was particularly difficult to deal with, with his sights set on Relic.

'Mr. Melhilm, huh. I heard Shizune ate him, but I guess he managed to survive somehow.'

Melhilm Herzog.

It was not a name Valdred was particularly happy to remember.

Melhilm was the first vampire to appear before Valdred after his realization that he was produced as a result of a series of experiments. He was also Valdred's creator.

Having been born from a mixture of multiple characters and memories, Valdred could not accept the concept of 'parents' on a personal level, in spite of his knowledge of the idea. Because he did not even have a stable sense of self, he was also repulsed by the word 'creator'. In fact, even to this day Val was not certain of the sensation of having been 'born'.

'And besides...'

As he continued to walk in silence, he remembered the first words he had heard during his short life as 'Valdred Ivanhoe'.

"A failure."

Two simple words. Though he had only just been born, even then he knew the purpose for which he had been created. Melhilm's comment essentially spelled an end for his reason to exist.

"But not to worry. I do not destroy vampires for the sole reason of being failed experiments."

And so, Val was sent to Melhilm's then-subordinate, Watt Stalf. In exchange for an identity to call his own, he had received freedom.

Val had no intention of resenting Melhilm for calling him a failure. But what he had said afterwards remained lodged at the back of his mind, echoing through his thoughts over and over again.

"I suppose the saying 'once burned, twice shy' holds more than a grain of truth."

'I wonder if something happened to Mr. Melhilm before I was born.'

In the end, Val was led to believe that he would never learn the truth behind Melhilm's self-deprecation. And even knowing that Melhilm was alive, he continued to think he would never understand. In fact, if Val were to go to Melhilm to speak with him in person, being

called a failure would be the least of his worries—he might be branded a traitor and killed on the spot.

As he imagined the moment of his own murder, Val remembered what Doctor and Professor had told him earlier.

"In other words, as a result of our examination, we found that your watermelon body has no physical function whatsoever. To be blunt, if you choose to believe, you would be completely unharmed even if someone should smash that watermelon."

Even if Melhilm were to destroy his core—the watermelon—Val's consciousness would persist unharmed.

In other words, he was closer to immortality than other vampires.

'What in the world am I?' He wondered to himself once more with a melancholy sigh, 'I can't live on without a core. Even if it's a watermelon...'

"Umm... are you all right?"

"Huh?"

Val snapped out of his reverie. Selim was looking at him worriedly.

"Is there something bothering you, Val?"

"Um, no! Sorry. I... I was just thinking about some stuff." Val replied with a grin. Selim sighed in relief and smiled. It was such a sincere expression of joy that Val began to feel embarrassed.

'Selim said before that she took on human form because of admiration and her dreams.'

Reminding himself that he had many things to ask her later, Valdred turned over the two words in his mind.

'I think... I think I admire humans. But that's not how the watermelon me feels. It's the human character that's been transplanted into me, wanting to go back to human form.'

Refusing to break himself out of his negativity, Val sighed loudly.

'Dreams, huh. I don't think I've ever thought of having one.'

As Val continued to contemplate thoughts about himself, they reached their destination.

"Um... I think you'll find the viscount here." He said to Ishibashi.

"Thank you."

The door to the room was majestic in nature, even in comparison to the grandeur of the castle. Val stood directly before it as he looked up at the Asian man. He took hold of the doorknob and shook it.

Nothing happened. Val wondered if there was no one inside, but they soon heard a set of footsteps approaching. The door opened halfway, and a maid poked her head outside.

"Oh! Val and Selim. What brings the two of you here?"

The maid looked relieved to see the children, who stood huddled together, but the moment she took notice of the Asian man behind them, she quickly grew cautious.

"...And you, sir?"

"Oh, this is..."

"My name is Ishibashi. I am a member of the Organization with which Viscount Waldstein was once affiliated."

Ishibashi introduced himself before Val could. The maid reflexively gave him a deep bow.

"I understand, sir. I take this to mean that you are a companion of Miss Dorothy Nifas?" The maid asked. Ishibashi glanced into the room and found a familiar white figure waving at him.

"Yes. ...I suppose this means that the viscount is aware of the current situation."

The maid took a step back in stead of an answer.

Ishibashi bowed and walked into the middle of the room. Dorothy was already there, but the viscount was not. Instead, a bespectacled man dressed like an office worker glanced at him curiously, perhaps because he was also Asian.

As Ishibashi looked around in search of the pool of blood, one of the maids said,

"Our apologies, sir. The master is currently occupied with other business. We believe he will be back shortly; please feel free to take a seat."

Ishibashi headed for a sofa in the corner of the room. But he suddenly stopped and turned to Val, who stood stock-still at the entrance.

"I'm sorry again for interrupting your date." He grinned. Val shook his head in horror.

"I-I told you, we're not on a date!"

"Heh. Anyway, thank you."

Ishibashi waved and flashed a reliable grin at Val and Selim, taking a seat at the edge of the sofa.

Valdred had been expecting to hear more about Melhilm from the viscount. But as long as the viscount was away, he had no reason to be there.

Though Relic was not a stranger to Val, they were not so close that Val would go to any lengths for his sake. He had no business, he felt, taking part in that particular conversation.

Trying to fight off the unpleasant feeling in his gut, Val turned to Selim.

"Heh heh heh... Sorry about the weird misunderstanding."

"Not at all. I... I'm... I'm very happy."

"Huh?"

Val did not expect such an answer from Selim.

But not even looking at his comical expression, the alraune smiled gently and repeated herself.

"I... I'm so happy."

'Huh. Huh?! Wait. We just met today! Uh... is this what it means to fall in love at first sight?! Did she fall in love at first sight... with me?! Wh-what am I supposed to do...?! How am I supposed to respond?!"

Val flailed bashfully, red as a tomato. But Selim's explanation turned his embarrassment into curiosity.

"I'm sure she would have loved to hold hands with a boy, just like this..."

"She"?"

The conversation took a sudden turn for the unexpected. Who was this third party, Val wondered.

"Who's—"

"HEEEY! I found more of Doctor's friends!"

Val was cut off by an excited shriek. He saw the jester running over from the end of the corridor, followed by the vampires whom they had met inside the caverns.

"Hey Val? Val? Is the viscount inside?"

"Not right now. I think he's got a bunch of important visitors, though."

"What?!" The jester squawked. But she took a moment to compose herself and turned to Val.

"Hey Val? Selim? Sorry for butting in on your date, but please help us find Doctor!"

"Doctor? I just saw him earlier..." Val said without much thought, but the jester's eyes narrowed as she began to press him.

"Really?! Where?! Where?! Where'd you see him? Please tell us!"

Val backed into the wall without even thinking, intimidated by the jester's excitement.

'What's going on?'

The jester had yet to explain a thing, but the flow of the conversation was nurturing an ominous feeling in the pit of Val's stomach.

Melhilm's arrival on Growerth.

The viscount's guests from the Organization.

His sighting of Doctor outside the castle.

The first two points seemed to have nothing to do with the third. And though Val did not know the specifics, perhaps Doctor really had just left the castle to go on a walk.

But strangely enough, Val felt as though those seemingly unrelated events were actually connected by a single thread. An indescribable sense of fear began to well up in his heart.

Though yet unbeknownst to him, Val's fears were being made a reality.

The chilly air surrounding the island loomed overhead, dark clouds threatening to devour everything underneath.

Valdred Ivanhoe, standing at the eye of the storm, had yet to understand.

The storm clouds would soon give way to rain.

The water would break down all in its path, both tragic and comedic.

As though washing away the future with the currents of the past.

†

The southern woods of Growerth.

There were two paths leading to and from Waldstein Castle.

One was the paved road leading up to the parking lot halfway up the mountain.

The other was a steep footpath carved into the mountainside.

The footpath was rarely used by anyone, so the only people who traversed it tended to be those who disliked crowds or those who did not wish to be noticed. Vampires who could not transform into bats or fog, for example, were chief among those who used the path.

The foliage was dense, limiting the line of sight to the pathway alone. But there were gaps in the trees along the way, through which the magnificent and almost-otherworldly Waldstein Castle could be seen.

But into the fantastic scene stepped in a being from another world entirely.

A gigantic suit of armor inspired by designs from both East and West, its form straight out of a storybook. But the armor did indeed exist—for it was now climbing the path, one powerful stride after another.

"...There's no one here..."

The suit of armor—Rudi—mumbled to himself, looking around.

Even an overgrown route was bound to have one or two people traversing it. Perhaps normal days were another story; but it was the opening night of the biggest festival on the island. It would be natural for some locals to use the footpath path to avoid the hustle and bustle of the main road.

Although Rudi initially considered heading to the castle through the uncultivated woods, he stepped onto the path once he sensed that no one walking along it.

'Is this all Zygmunt's work?'

Perhaps Zygmunt had subjugated the locals and cleared the path so Rudi could access the castle with ease.

But there was no use speculating. Rudi continued on his way, fanning the flames of revenge.

'That's right. There's only one thing I have to think about: Theo.'

The moment he shut his eyes, the nightmare from his past came to life in his mind.

The stench of blood.

The heat of the flames licking at his face.

His father's head rolling on the floor.

His mother's body, her neck twisted in an unnatural direction.

His friend's corpse, turned to charcoal.

He was disgusted by everything before him. He cursed his own weakness. And once his thoughts shifted to the vampire he once thought a friend, he could not even muster words of outrage.

But at that point, even his own past was nothing more than fuel to bring despair to the vampire who had stolen everything from him—Theodosius M. Waldstein.

From the day he first met Theo, Rudi was trapped. He was trapped in a fantasy where vampires truly existed. It was an inescapable hell.

He and Theresia had walked through that abyss together.

But now, their hope for escape was within arm's reach, or so it seemed.

'Theresia, huh.'

What was on her mind as she walked through that hell? Was she also planning revenge? Or was this now the only path she could envision for herself? Or perhaps she had another reason altogether.

Although Rudi had wondered on occasion, he never thought deeply about it. He did not, after all, care what drove Theresia to walk alongside him. As long as she could help him with his vengeance, he was happy.

The thought of using his lone surviving friend like a tool sickened him. The dark flames roaring in his heart threatened to once more show him the scene from his nightmares.

The images from that day came to life again.

Each and every word that Theodosius uttered with his sister in his arms was replayed with frightening accuracy.

"It's been a while."

It was a nauseating voice. The palpable childlikeness of that tone made it all the worse.

When Rudi opened his eyes, the vampire from his memories was standing before him with an unchanged smile.

'If... if only I could kill this nightmare. Then I'd finally find rest.'

"Heh heh... You're still such a sleepyhead, Rudi."

'What?'

The nightmare's words were different from usual. Rudi's heart stopped for a single second.

Unable to recognize the situation unfolding before him, all he could do was sense his heart grow colder by the second. It was as though his entire body would freeze to the very last cell.

His mind refused to accept the scene. But his body and his instincts understood everything with frightening clarity, trying very hard to not let his heart take notice.

His throat felt dry.

It felt as though all the water in his body had evaporated in an instant.

But there was cold sweat running down his back.

An ominous chill ran down his spine as even his mind began to understand the truth.

His instincts desperately held back his sense of reasoning, as though he were attempting to reach forbidden knowledge.

Several seconds passed since the beginning of his struggle. Slowly, the boy standing before him smiled at his old friend.

The pathway was perfunctorily lined with streetlights. The boy's sculpted smile, so very slightly illuminated underneath, was more ominous than it had ever been in Rudi's memories.

"So... what is it that you want with me, Old Friend?"

A new line. A new term of address. A new smile.

A new series of images were being added to Rudi's nightmares.

It was then that he was finally forced to realize the truth.

The nightmare before him was real.

"Anyway... it's been so long, Rudi. How are you?"

Theodosius M. Waldstein.

Rudi's nemesis—the one who had stolen away his family, friends, and peaceful life—and the starting point and finish line of his life as an Eater.

The silver-haired, silver-eyed vampire with the body of a child. The vampire who was his friend for many happy days, which ended with his betrayal.

He beheaded his father,

Pierced his mother's chest,

Snapped his dear friend's neck,

And stole his beloved sister away.

He was the main character of Rudi's nightmares, as well as his nightmare incarnate.

Theodosius.

Theodosius M. Waldstein.

His closest friend, one he had called 'Theo'.

A nonhuman friend he could trust more than even his family.

The words confirming his identity endlessly repeated themselves in his head.

Again,

And again.

But he could not speak. He could not step forward, clench his fists, or fire stakes from inside his armor to instantly kill his nemesis.

"Ah... Aaah..."

He desperately forced his lungs to breathe, but his vocal cords refused to budge. He could not even control his tongue.

Even his scream, stifled by his own mouth, was carried off by a soft breeze that swept past the hill.

The trees shaking in the wind began to murmur all at once, as though speaking in place of the young man in the armor.

But the emotions expressed by the whisperings were not fury at the vampire who had stolen away everything he held dear.

"...What's wrong, Rudi Wenders?"

The sound of rustling leaves echoed inside the armor.

"You're stronger now, aren't you?"

Rudi's eyes no longer registered the light from the street lamp. Everything went dark.

But it was not the darkness of night.

"That armor's one of Carnald Strassburg's designs. He made it specifically for Eaters, right? You're strong enough to use it freely now... That's really amazing."

The darkness swelled from within, filling every corner of Rudi's world with blackness.

And in the shadows, all he could see was Theo and his smile.

But that was not strange to Rudi.

After all, the vampire standing there was darkness itself.

"But still, even with all that power..."

There was a moment of icy silence between the two figures on the pathway. But the vampire, as though he had read the young man's mind, went on to say:

"I wonder... Why are you so scared?"

Rudi felt his body grow numb, his senses being peeled away piece by piece.

It was a strange, off-kilter sensation, as though he were looking down upon himself from very high in the air—as though he did not exist in reality.

'No.'

Somewhere deep down, he was trying to escape.

The vampire who had haunted his dreams all these years was right before his eyes. But for some reason, he kept hoping that it was all a hallucination. His senses were rattled to the point of madness.

'No. No. No.'

The emotion he had been suppressing with bloodlust burst forth from the darkness.

It was pure, unadulterated fear.

Excited shouts and the sound of fireworks echoed in the distance.

It all sounded like something from another world to Rudi, but the truth of the matter was that the festivities were taking place only several hundred meters from where he stood—at the top of the mountain path.

Emotions from every part of the spectrum filled the island.

And at that very moment, the curtains rose on this year's Carnale Festival.

†

The main streets of the city of Neuberg.

"...Did you find her?"

"No. Not a trace."

An anxious teenager was looking to a group of men slightly older than himself, who were shaking their heads.

This street—the biggest on the island—was normally packed with civil servants and tourists. Lined with civic centers, hotels, and recreational facilities, it was the hub of the island's tourism industry.

The sidewalk was nearly deserted, likely because most people had gone to the opening ceremony. It was there that Relic was wandering in search of Hilda, who had presumably gone missing from the hospital.

As Relic's distress continued, a large figure leapt from the roof of a nearby building and landed on its feet without a sound.

It was a young man who had fully taken the form of a werewolf. He approached Relic and the others without a care, not receiving any strange looks thanks to the fact that one of the Carnale Festival's attractions was a costume parade. Though the parade was scheduled for a later date, many festival-goers were already in costume from day one.

Of course, jumping from the rooftop was rather excessive, even for a werewolf. But Relic was so anxious that he did not point that out.

"Hilda's scent cuts off around here. I think she might have gotten into a car or something." The werewolf said, sniffing the air. The worry in Relic's eyes only grew thicker, prompting another werewolf to jump in.

"Maybe it's backwards; she just got off the car here and went to the hospital."

It was an unlikely possibility, but at this point, Relic would take any hope the situation could offer.

"Then... maybe we just missed each other at the hospital."

"Yeah. Then one of the others at the hospital'll contact us many minute now. All of us werewolves know your girlfriend's face, Relic. She practically a celebrity! So let's just wait for 'em, okay?"

The werewolves laughed as confidently as they could, trying to keep Relic's spirits up. Relic joined in on their laughter for a moment and took a deep breath. Although he did not have the need to breathe, Relic liked to mimic the gesture in order to calm himself. That habit did not begin out of admiration for humans, however; he had been influenced by seeing Michael take the same action before greeting Ferret.

Relic exhaled and remembered Michael's injuries. A sharp glint rose to his eyes as he went over the situation.

'Does this have something to do with the Eater who attacked Ferret and Michael?'

It was too exact a timing for it to be a coincidence. According to Ferret, who was one of his first targets, the Eater in the gigantic suit of armor was apparently after a vampire called Theodosius.

Theodosius Waldstein. Relic remembered hearing the name from his father.

The Waldstein family was spilt into two bloodlines—a line of vampires and a line of humans. The human line, however, was severed completely several years after Relic and Ferret were born.

The last member of the human branch was an orphaned boy named Theodosius. But he had been bitten by a vampire and lost his humanity.

Relic did not hear anything about what happened to the boy afterwards. But he was quite certain that his father knew.

'I don't know what Theodosius might have done. Maybe he murdered that Eater's loved ones.'

From the horrifying show of fury the Eater directed at Ferret—a vampire he had only just met—Relic supposed that the man must despise the entire Waldstein family, or perhaps all of vampirekind.

'But... I can't let him get away with hurting Ferret and landing Michael in the hospital. I... I won't forgive him for making Ferret cry.'

He clenched his fists, quietly but passionately honing the outrage he had suppressed earlier in the hospital.

'And... if he's even dragged Hilda into this...!'

The air around Relic changed; countless shadows began casting themselves from the pavement and the walls.

The shadows then took on the form of bats and began to fly in a circle around Relic, slowly closing in on him. And once the circle narrowed, the bats were absorbed into Relic's body.

The werewolves, awestruck by the sight, took a step back without thinking.

When vampires transformed into bats or fog, most of them could not transform anything but their own bodies and the clothing they wore. Even those who were a cut above the rest could affect little more than objects that they were touching directly, like the ground beneath them.

Relic, however, produced bats even from places that he was not in physical contact with. The werewolves knew what that meant; and as they beheld the shadow cast in Relic's normally warm eyes, they shuddered in silent fear.

"...We'll go ahead and report to the viscount."

"Thank you. I'll search for her from overhead one more time." Relic said with a nod, and glared at the night sky.

The shadows underneath him shook, and a second later, a flock of bats were launched into the air like water out of a geyser. The sound of their wingbeats filled the air, and the great mass of shadow disappeared into the sky with a loud noise.

There was nothing left where Relic had been standing earlier. The werewolves looked on with both worry and expectation at their not-quite master, and quickly left for Waldstein Castle to report to the viscount.

They moved so quickly that they left nothing but a gentle breeze in the wake of their departure.

Relic flew through the air in the form of a flock of countless bats, looking over his hometown.

The festival lights glinted off the ornaments made specifically for the celebrations. The entertainment district shone more brightly than usual.

But there was something off about the scene.

With a sense of discomfort about the city he called home, the bats quickly dispersed.

The thousands of bats circled the sky over the island several times, and Relic was finally able to pinpoint the origin of his suspicions.

But that only led to the worsening of his fears.

'The island... it's too quiet.'

Waldstein Castle, inner courtyard.

<...and I thank the fate that brought me to share the hometown of this venerable artist!>

The voice of a young man, dignified yet slightly overdramatic, rang out from the speakers.

The man holding the microphone, who was greeting the people from the balcony, was Watt Stalf—the mayor of Neuberg and one of the island's most influential individuals.

<Let tonight be a night to celebrate! I promise each and every one of you that even this very island is a work of art, on par with the great creations of Carnald Strassburg himself.>

The look of outrage he had shown at City Hall earlier was nowhere to be found. Watt was now wearing the face of the mayor, the man who would lead the Carnale Festival.

But he was silently swearing, his character unchanged from that of the usual petty villain.

'Shit. The fuck's up with this crowd?'

Even for a man who placed little value on human life, the scene unfolding before his eyes was one that utterly devalued humanity.

<I hereby announce the opening of the greatest art piece in history... This year's Carnale Festival!>

There was a thunderous roar of applause, accompanied by a deafening hurrah from the crowd (perhaps intent on bringing down the castle with the force of their cheers).

Fireworks were launched into the air, sending colorful sparks into the night sky.

So numerous were the attendees that one crowd merged with another, creating waves of people that surged to and fro, sending the mayor's way a generous round of applause.

Watt looked down upon the faceless masses, made up of people who could not help but lose their individuality amongst the multitudes.

'Tch. Talk about a *literal* case of non-individuality.'

He knew that the mass of people before him—each and every human—were already under Zygmunt's subjugation. He also knew that most of the island's population was headed to the castle at that very moment.

It seemed that some people were left untouched by Zygmunt's actions; medical personnel, law enforcement, and harbor officials were left where they were, in order to prevent too much confusion.

Of course, many people had come of their own will. The Carnale Festival was an important celebration to the islanders, and it was also a famous international event. But even those who wished to be there in the first place were subjugated by now.

'Wonder if the count's started to figure things out right about now.'

If the gunman was speaking with the viscount, the latter would now know of Zygmunt's presence. How would Gerhardt respond, when all he could advise Watt was to not turn Zygmunt against him?

Watt glared at his surroundings as though trying to get a glimpse at his rival's solution to the problem.

Powerful as Zygmunt was, subjugating vampires was still impossible.

That was why Watt assumed that the viscount would have his subordinate vampires on standby as guards. But what caught his eye first was,

'The hell.'

A girl in the first row who was dressed like a jester, applauding so hard it looked as though her hands might erode away.

Once she realized that Watt met her eyes for a moment, she smiled sheepishly and quickly disappeared into the crowds.

'What is that idiot up to?'

With an annoyed sigh, the mayor once more surveyed his surroundings.

A man and a woman—a pair of singers from Growerth—were currently on the balcony stage. The audience's attention was focused on them.

Several people in the audience, however, clearly stood out from the rest. Watt squinted to get a better look.

He first noticed the group of vampires who had betrayed him for the Waldstein maids. They seemed to be looking for something. Following them was a green-haired boy accompanying a bespectacled girl.

"The kid's probably Val, and... Fuck. I know all their faces."

They were all vampires who had betrayed him. Watt quickly lost interest and looked elsewhere to try and spot anyone suspicious.

He suddenly noticed a girl. She was looking at him.

At first, he did not recognize her. But once his eyes fell on her humble clothing, he remembered that they met briefly earlier that day, when he was leaving the viscount's parlor.

Of course, he had no idea why she was looking at him.

'That kid's a vampire, too. But she's not from the island. Damn it. I don't like outlanders figuring out who I am...'

The girl continued to watch Watt for some time, but suddenly looked away and disappeared into the crowds, just as the jester had earlier.

The jester, having run off in embarrassment, tried to get back to searching for Doctor as she had been doing three minutes ago. But the image of Watt on the balcony giving his speech refused to leave her thoughts.

"Aww... I couldn't toss the confetti after all. Too bad. But just hearing Master Watt's voice makes me so happy!"

She lightly slapped her face and took a deep breath.

"Okay! Off to look for Doctor! Now that I've heard Master Watt's voice, I'm going to find him for sure!"

Val and Selim came over to her, their eyes downcast.

"Nothing. We couldn't find him anywhere."

"Maybe he's left the castle area..."

At the beginning of their search, Val had headed straight for the mountain path at the back of the castle. But he did not see Doctor. They then came to the conclusion that it would be more efficient to focus on the crowds at the festival rather than wander aimlessly through the streets.

Ultimately unable to find Doctor, Val wearily turned his ears to the song coming from the stage.

The other vampires joined them soon afterwards, cracking their joints and pouring out complaints at the jester.

"It's no good. We won't be able to find anyone in this crowd."

"And don't forget he's a vampire. If he's transformed into a flock of bats, we didn't stand a chance of finding him to begin with."

"And even if we start looking for some bats, we don't even know what kind of bats to look for. What color? What species?"

"We're screwed."

Everyone was clearly tired; they had given their all into the search. Just moving through the crowds must have been a challenge for the vampires, who usually did little but laze around the castle.

"What to do...?"

The vampires sighed loudly. Val continued to think, wondering if there was anything he could do.

In the end, he was forced to conclude that legwork was all he could manage.

"Selim, let's go check out the mountain path one more time. Maybe Doctor'll come back that way and we'll meet up with him somehow."

"Yes! That's a great idea, Val." Selim replied with a smile. Val felt apologetic at her enthusiasm.

"...Sorry. I was supposed to be showing you around the festival..."

"Not at all, Val. I'm worried about Doctor, and just the fact that I get to be outside with everyone else makes me very happy."

Each and every word she said was full of sincere gratitude. But that only made Val feel guilty and envious.

The fact that she could feel joy at something as simple as having company.

Though they were both plant-based vampires, Val felt that Selim was much more human in attitude than himself.

'Even though we're both plants... Selim... why...?'

'...!'

Val caught himself just before his envy could grow into something worse, and chided himself silently.

'Damn it! What's wrong with me? ...This is why I can't be a plant or a human.'

Perhaps it was illogical for a vampire like him to strive toward humanity or planthood. But at that point, logic mattered little to Val.

That was why he had yet to realize: The moment he felt the emotion known as envy, Val was just as human—if not even more so—as Selim.

†

Somewhere in the city.

A luxury car raced along the road toward the castle.

There were no other vehicles on the streets. The municipal car pressed forward, just barely skirting the speed limit.

"What's that idiot Watt doing now?" The occupant of the back seats asked the driver.

"Oh... um, the mayor is currently taking part in the opening ceremony." The woman at the wheel said, not even trying to hide her fear of the passenger.

The woman was the mayor's personal secretary. But she did not even protest at the insult to her employer. That was, however, not because she agreed with the passenger; it was because she thought it would be in her best interests to not talk back to the Eater she was transporting.

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence. The voice from the back returned, this time sounding slightly less irritated.

"I guess I owe you one, though. Tch... I said I'd never accept help from the asshole. Look at me now." The Eater said disdainfully. The secretary could do nothing but continue driving, too fearful to agree or disagree.

Shizune Kijima had attempted to regenerate her legs in the dojo's showers.

The regeneration process went faster than she had expected, but she was beginning to think that it would be some time before she could walk properly again. That was when a municipal vehicle arrived at the dojo.

And now, she was being driven along by Watt's secretary.

At first, she thought of rejecting his offer. But as long as Melhilm's whereabouts continued to escape her, Shizune would be at an advantage fighting alongside Watt rather than against him.

The silence continued for some time, before Shizune once more opened her mouth.

"To be honest, I thought of torturing you here to figure out where that bastard's heart is."

"Ah...!"

The secretary did not even try to hold back her scream. Shizune grinned. Instead of adding a 'just joking', she plainly continued.

"But there's no way Watt would tell anyone where he's hiding his heart, and even if he did, there's no time anymore. ...Yeah, just let me off here."

"Pardon?"

"You can go ahead and run off if you'd like. I'll take care of the rest myself."

"What do you—"

The moment the secretary spoke, the rear-view mirror was engulfed in shadow. Though it had already been reflecting the night, even the lights from the street lamps were extinguished from its surface.

Shizune had probably sensed the presence much earlier. She turned to face the black mass behind her without a hint of fear.

There were enough bats there to engulf the entire car.

And each and every one of them glared at Shizune with human eyes.

The bats caught up to the car with incredible speed, covering its windshield.

The secretary shrieked in terror as everything before her eyes was suddenly filled with the black creatures.

"EEEEEEK!"

The sound of the bats' gnashing fangs overpowered even the sound of the car's engine as it continued forward. And once even the windows were entirely covered, the secretary hit the brakes without a moment's hesitation.

She had probably chosen to stop instead of speeding up to outrun the bats because she was fearful of causing an accident. But that was fine by Shizune. As soon as the car came to a complete stop, she slammed the door open.

Shizune had expected the bats to come swarming inside, but the moment she stepped onto the road, the bats covering the car flew into the air all at once.

The flock of bats gathered together in the air, circling round and round. And soon, they landed at a point about ten meters away from Shizune, taking the form of Melhilm Herzog.

"You're pretty rough for a guy dressed like an aristocrat."

"Judge by appearances, will you? You'll regret your folly, as I did in the past."

Sarcastic greetings followed their sudden reunion.

The secretary sped off on her car as soon as the bats abandoned her. Melhilm did not spare her a glance, however, and instead continued to stare straight into Shizune's eyes.

"Oh? Did I really come across as such a dainty young lady?"

"Don't be so full of yourself. You weren't the one who deceived me through appearances." Melhilm said with a relaxed grin. Shizune narrowed her eyes.

"You're talking one-on-one with a lady, and you bring a third party into the conversation? Really romantic of you. Who's the lucky ass-kicker?"

"Heh. You'll know soon enough."

"...?"

Shizune was struck by Melhilm's comment, and decided to pry for more information. But Melhilm seemed to have already tired of the mutual volley of insults.

"...If you survive the night, perhaps!"

Melhilm spread his arms wide, and his body instantly transformed into a black shadow. It scattered in all directions, turning into a flock of bats hundreds, or perhaps thousands strong.

"So you could pull tricks like this, huh? Remind me next time to fight you with a handicap."

Watching the black wall spreading quickly before her eyes, Shizune said in wonder,

"You know, I might have broken a sweat if you'd done this back on that night I ate you."

Remembering the taste of Melhilm's flesh, she grinned voraciously at the flock of bats.

"I doubt I'd have had enough forks and knives for them all."

If the bats had human mouths, perhaps they would have told Shizune to shut her mouth. But the only sounds they made were the squeaks from their mouths and the flaps of their wingbeats.

It was certainly a sight to behold, but there wasn't an ounce of fear in Shizune's eyes. With her reflexes and agility, she could cut down ten thousand bats with the silver knives she carried in her pockets.

But Shizune did not put that hypothetical plan into action.

She stopped herself from speaking unnecessarily and tensed her entire body. Her mind, focused to the limit, directed her body to take action.

With the black wall looming before her, Shizune leapt backwards with all of her strength.

Less than a second later, a silver glint emerged from the wall of darkness and cut through the air with monstrous force.

Then came two simultaneous impacts: The sound of something smashing into the ground, and the sensation of the gust that blew past Shizune in the wake of the attack.

The bats scattered from the center of the silver impact.

Standing on the other side of the wall, through the gaping hole left by the scattered bats, was a familiar face. The Eater with short blonde hair, holding a silver whip in her hand.

The girl who had driven Shizune into a corner eight hours earlier was standing in the midst of the darkness, wearing the same smile as before.

If her attack had connected, Shizune would have lost her life. But she responded to the assault with surprising nonchalance.

"I thought you were being pretty talkative today. You were waiting for your friend to catch up, huh?"

The human eyes in each bat's eye sockets seemed to sneer in response. But even in the sight of thousands of such eyes, Shizune refused to back down.

Seeing the smile on her face, the Eater—Theresia Riefenstahl—looked questioningly at the woman she had nearly killed earlier that day.

"Your name was Shizune, wasn't it? You look quite happy for someone who's about to die."

Shizune grinned at the provocation, flashing her fangs in response.

"I'm just excited, you know? It's just about dinnertime."

The Eater-turned-vampire looked upon the two ingredients prepared before her.

"And what do you know? Here I've got a delicious vampire and a tasty-looking Eater coming right up to me. This is going to be one amazing feast."

†

Waldstein Castle Parlor.

As the singers' music and the cheers of the audience engulfed the castle, a group of monsters—the creatures who truly ruled the castle—were discussing about their predicament.

"Yes. And?"

<It's no good. I managed to shoot down a couple Branches, but I don't even know where to start looking for the Trunk.>

In the crowded parlor occupied by maids, werewolves, and even a sentient pool of blood, the Asian guest—Aiji Ishibashi—was receiving a report from his brother via phone.

Bridgestone, the younger of the twins, had come across several more Branches he knew by appearance. But Zygmunt's main body, known as the Trunk, was still nowhere to be found.

<There's no point torturing the Branches or taking hostages. Zygmunt can regenerate 'em without even breaking a sweat.>

"Damn it. Is Caldimir the only one who knows what the Trunk looks like?"

<Laetitia probably knows, too. But her phone's been busy for a while, and now she's out of the service area.>

"Understood. For now, search for Melhilm. I'll try and find a way to stop Rudi and Theresia."

With that, Ishibashi hung up on his brother and walked over to the viscount in the middle of the room.

Once Ishibashi was next to the sofa, the viscount (who had returned to the parlor at some point) wrote in the air in a sombre font:

[It seems... That things may become quite difficult from here on out.]

Apparently, the viscount had exchanged greetings with Ishibashi before the latter's phone call. He dove straight into the topic at hand.

[Ah, to think that Zygmunt would personally come to Growerth! Speak of the devil and he shall appear, they say—'說曹操, 曹操到'.]²

Writing out his thoughts in a considerate combination of Chinese characters and German, the viscount connected the ends of his sentences as though crossing his arms.

² The saying “說曹操, 曹操到” means “speak of Cao Cao(a character from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms), and he comes”. It has the same meaning as the English idiom “speak of the devil, and he shall appear”.

[Zygmunt is a vampire who possesses twelve bodies. Capturing eleven Branches will be of no use if you cannot find the one at the center of them all.]

Zygmunt Kiparis had been an officer of the Organization even when Gerhardt was still a part of the group, and was a fanatical follower of Caldimir. This vampire was capable of subjugating organisms through airborne infection, but that was not all.

Zygmunt's identity was that of a vampire composed of twelve different bodies.

Though the bodies were separate, they shared a singular mind through airborne blood. And as such, they were capable of acting in many different places at once. The main body, known as the Trunk, controlled the others—known as Branches.

One ruler, eleven generals, and the infinite soldiers they created. That was why Zygmunt was known by the moniker of 'The Green Army', and was designated one of the Organization's most powerful weapons.

[Hm... If only we knew where to find the Trunk, Dorothy and I could go to convince Zygmunt in person.]

Snow incarnate nodded firmly alongside the viscount. But Ishibashi frowned slightly.

"It would be best if words were enough to convince Zygmunt. But he would place Caldimir's orders above his own life."

Ishibashi did not stop there. He worriedly glanced at his old friend and respected mentor, the bloody viscount.

"And... there are people here who should worry you more than Zygmunt."

[...Those connected to Theodosius. Of course... I was prepared for their coming, but to think it would be at a time like this...]

"...So he's here, sir? The mass murderer?" Ishibashi asked, not bothering to soften the truth. But the viscount put his efforts into doing what Ishibashi did not bother with.

[...Perhaps he is indeed here, in a sense. Theodosius does exist, but the mass murderer you speak of is no more. Not in this castle, nor anywhere in this world. Only the sins left in his wake remain as a reminder of his existence.]

Mage and the other familiars were confused by the viscount's statement, but Ishibashi had known him for long enough to understand what he meant.

"That sin is the most important part, sir. It is true that the Organization has no qualms with leaving him be, so long as he does not cause us any more trouble." Ishibashi said. But he then shook his head, adding:

"But Rudi and Theresia will not agree with our position."

[I also understand.]

The viscount's reply was remarkably grave. The maids and the werewolves tensed at the sight.

[And yet... I cannot let pass the fact that my beloved daughter Ferret and my good neighbor and subject Michael were so grievously injured.]

Was it anger or sadness filling his words? Or was it an impersonal weight of responsibility he held as Lord of Waldstein Castle? No one could read the viscount's expression, and a heavy silence fell over the parlor.

It seemed as though the stillness would last forever, but Mage finally made to spur the conversation forward and turned to his fellow Asian with a forced smile.

"B-but... there are three officers of the Organization present! I can't speak for this Theodosius character, but couldn't you, perhaps... do something about the one called Zygmunt?"

"...If we ignore the well-being of the islanders, yes."

Sensing the ice in Ishibashi's voice, the viscount jumped into the conversation.

[Your ignoring their well-being would be most troubling. I shall gladly bow my head and entreat you, as the former governor of Growerth—I ask that the people of the island not be harmed.]

Though surprised by Gerhardt's show of responsibility, Ishibashi accepted his plea instantly.

"That's precisely why we're here today, sir. Although I'm somewhat worried about my brother." He smiled in an attempt to calm Gerhardt, and chuckled cynically. "If we were intent on ignoring their safety, we would have brought along Black or Gold from the beginning."

[Of course. Indeed, you are correct.]

Once Ishibashi named two colors that belonged to officers of the Organization, the viscount seemed to sigh in relief as he remembered his old friends.

[I still speak to Garde over the internet almost every day. I suspect that this friend of mine could easily overpower even Zygmunt's endless armies. After all, the Black Gravekeeper only grows stronger in the presence of the dead.]

†

A port town in northern Germany.

The port town from which the ferry to Growerth departed was home to many other ships and boats; most were fishing ships, each vessel clearly lived-in and filled with a sense of daily life.

Daily life, naturally, was intertwined with work. And sometimes conversations like this could be heard on the docks:

"What're we going to do with all this leftover fish, Dad?"

"...How am I supposed to know?! Shit! We finally get a big haul for once, but everyone's off at the festival! The market's deserted!"

An irritated father-son pair was standing face-to-face on the pier. The sun had already set on them.

From the sound of things, they were fishermen; the vessel beside them was full of their catch from early that morning.

But the fish market had already closed. And the men did not seem to be particularly inclined to preserve the fish for later.

"Damn it! If only we had some connections with a canned food factory..."

"Sure, it's a big haul. But all we caught were small fry. Anyway, we have to make a decision soon or we'll end up having to waste all this fish."

They looked up at the container on their ship, powerless to do a thing. Inside was their catch; a veritable mountain of fish that they could not even take to market. The flames of life had given way to a dank, clammy odor that filled the air around them.

Perhaps they should just dump the fish in the nearby waters, the men began to think.

But at that moment, a stranger approached them. A mysterious figure wrapped up in black bandages.

"How much for those fish? How much?"

As the fishermen wondered if the stranger was a man or a woman, the mummy in black made their business clear.

"Could you sell them to me? Sell them to me right now?"

The fishermen hesitated at the sudden offer, but the figure in black quickly reached into their bandages and drew a wad of bills, tossing it at the men.

"Is this enough to buy all the fish? Is this enough?"

"Huh? Wha...? This is too sudden... Uh... It's too mu-"

"Sold!"

The father hesitated at the clearly overpriced bid, but the son instantly validated the transaction.

"H-hey..."

"Stay quiet, Dad! From the looks of this guy, he's probably going to Growerth. Maybe there's going to be a fish party there."

"But this is too much!"

"We're not ripping him off, Dad! He's the one who offered!"

As the fishermen hissed at one another, the figure in black grinned at the massive quantity of fish they now possessed.

"I was worried! I was! The last ferry was gone. The last ferry to Growerth. Thanks a lot! Thanks!" They said, excitedly hopping on the spot.

The fishermen nervously put on forced smiles, but a moment later, their faces—and the rest of their bodies—froze.

The figure in black leapt up with unthinkable power and landed on the container atop the ship with ease. They then picked up a small fish from the pile and brought it to their bandage-covered lips.

"Huh...?"

How had the person leapt so high into the air?

What were they planning to do with the stale fish that were still alive?

And how did they plan to transport all the fish alone?

The questions they had were erased in an instant.

A scene so bizarre that everything else seemed natural soon unfolded before their eyes.

With their free hand, the black figure pulled back the bandages around their lips, exposing a pair of glinting incisors.

The incisors were so long, in fact, that the younger fisherman frowned.

'Are those... fangs?'

Was it a part of their costume, he wondered, even after bearing witness to the figure's incredible jump. But perhaps that was because they had never once come into contact with inhuman individuals like this character.

As father and son looked on in confusion, the mummy sank their fangs into the fish's belly.

But the unusual act was but the bell that signaled the raising of the curtains. The beginning of an incredible scene the father and son would never forget.

The moment it was bitten by the black figure, the prone fish began flailing as though it had just left the water. It left the figure's bandaged hand and fell into the container.

The figure in black looked down at the fish, and with their mouth once more covered by bandages, spoke.

This time, their repetitive manner of speech was nowhere to be found. There was an authoritative force and power in their voice—like a proud emperor commanding his servants, as though questioning his orders was forbidden.

"...Propagate."



The moment they gave their command, the splashing fish leapt up.

Then, there was a moment of silence. Followed by the sound of many more flailing fins.

Splish splash smack slap

Another moment of silence.

Smack smack splash thud slap splash

Silence and noise came and went in turn. Eventually, the silence grew shorter and shorter as one moment of noise blended into the next, creating one massive uproar.

Splash. Smack. **Smack.** **Slap. Thud.** **Splash. Slap. Thud.**

It was the sound of waves.

Though there was nothing but fish inside the container, the fish themselves became a little sea, creating currents and waves in the closed space as though in a desperate bid for recognition.

They had been limp and still until just moments earlier. But with the first fish in the lead, the rest followed in twisting and flailing as though they had been set back into the water.

But the fishermen sensed no life from the fish.

The eyes of the fish were dead and grey, clearly different from their catch early that morning. It was as though they were being electrocuted, moving by reflex alone.

As the chilling movements continued, the bandaged figure narrowed their eyes in ecstasy and commanded:

"Mix together."

Silence returned to the harbor.

The fish jostling in the container stopped as though they had lost all their strength.

But the silence soon came to an end, and the ears of the fishermen and the figure in black were assaulted by a new noise.

Father and son cringed and covered their ears at the sound. The figure in black gleefully watched with their exposed right eye.

Something resembling the sound of pieces of expanded polystyrene smashing against one another, and the sound of something soft being beaten with a stick.

It was as though the fish, in spite of having no voices, were screaming.

They contorted their bodies against one another in physically impossible ways as they pushed and pulled toward the center of the container, not caring that their bodies were being ground to pulp.

Pieces of flesh and scales were peeled off their bodies. Bones and innards mixed together as though they were separate creatures, sometimes defying gravity as they gathered.

The fishermen could not see what was happening from their vantage point on the pier. But the sound alone was enough to tell them what was going on.

So specific was the noise inside that though the phenomenon was humanly impossible, their imagination could fill in the gaps. The sound filled the harbor, creaking and smacking.

The diced pieces of flesh soon gathered together. Muscle with muscle, bone with bone. They wove together with no set pattern, creating new masses of flesh and cartilage.

"This is going to take a while. It is! About an hour. It would be faster if I used human corpses. It would be super-duper fast." The figure in black said to themselves from beside the fishermen, once more returning to their repetitive self.

'Wha...?'

The bandaged person had been atop the ship until just moments ago. When had they climbed down?

Instead of answering the fishermen's silent question, the figure in black beamed like a little child and asked them a question utterly irrelevant to the commotion taking place inside the container.

"Is there an internet cafe around here? Is there an internet cafe with all the popular games? Underground Gun Mania would be the best. That would be the super bestest."

The fishermen could feel their legs turn to jelly.

Though they could not see what was happening inside the container, they knew without a doubt that something unnatural and grotesque was taking place.

"...Never mind. I'll find it myself. Never mind. I'll come back for the fish. I'll come back for them in an hour."

Leaving behind the awestruck father and son, the figure in black walked away with a crack of the neck.

They then stopped just as they passed by the pair, looking straight at the fishermen with their eye wide open.

"You didn't see anything, get it? You saw nothing. You have to forget about it, okay? You have to forget."

The bandaged figure turned away from the frozen fishermen, apparently having lost interest. But they left a single command as they departed:

"Accept."

It was a simple but normally unpalatable command. But the men could not defy the order. No amount of struggling would allow simple humans to go against the instruction.

The moment the figure in black disappeared, father and son took the money they received and sped away without turning back.

Left in the harbor was the sound of something stirring.

A grotesque 'something', no longer a mountain of fish.

Creak creak

Creak creak

Creak creak

†

[It is not the act of drinking blood that qualifies one to be a vampire.] The viscount wrote proudly, recalling the abilities of his old friend and party member.

[Humanity figures little into the matter. After all, it is because we transcend the laws of nature that we are called monsters.]

10章 花は罪人の心を癒し



Chapter 10 - The Flower Heals the Heart of the Sinner, and...

In the beginning, the vampire was but a simple flower.

But once she had taken the form of a human girl, some began to feign understanding in spite of knowing nothing about her.

"It looks like a human girl, but that's how it lures you close before it devours you."

"It's just like an anglerfish."

"A glutton of a vampire that can't even hunt for itself."

But anyone who came to know her in person quickly found themselves changing their minds.

She was just as gentle as she appeared, and nothing about her resembled the vampires from storybooks and myths.

Though she subsisted on blood and was born under a guillotine—though she nested in the midst of many tools of execution—she was incredibly kind.

More accurately, she was possessed of good character. Or, to put it in negative terms, she was good-natured to the point of stubbornness.

Though she was far more beautiful than most other vampires in spite of her youth, she would never abuse her looks in order to draw closer to humans and drink their blood.

The thought had probably never even crossed her mind.

The more people spoke with her, the more they realized that her heart was impossibly pure.

Those who grew closer to Selim were taken aback by her character—so different from what they had expected—that they were embarrassed by their own prejudice and were left fearing for her sake.

They feared that perhaps this innocent vampire would one day be betrayed and broken.

Perhaps this pure-hearted girl would then despair at the world and fall from grace.

Perhaps this sincere and gentle soul—such a rare thing in the realm of vampires—would one day become just like themselves. Both those who were blind to their own malice and those who were generally called 'good' found themselves humbled by her character.

Perhaps worrying for her sake like this could be considered nosy. But they could not just leave her be.

It was not love that guided them.

Nor was it pity.

The thought of protecting her simply occurred to them.

Then was she truly such a lofty creature? Was she a saint? The pool of blood would answer thus:

[Not so, I must say. Though I confess I have never personally witnessed her in such a state, even she sometimes falls to her own greed. Even she is sometimes angered for reasons that would not anger others. From a human perspective(though one must keep in mind that she is a plant-based vampire), she is possessed of a perfectly normal character. But something about her draws others to her. Perhaps this magnetic charm of hers is the vampiric ability with which Selim Vergès was born.

[I also confess than I am one of those drawn to her—in an entirely platonic sense, of course.]

And yet again, the alraune's charm drew in another to her presence.

The moment the boy who was lost in a struggle with his own identity met her in the cavern, his heart was already hers.

'Beautiful...'

The first sentiment he had ever felt. His oldest memory.

The only words he produced before his psyche was blended with those of others.

The one sentiment he could truly trust finally came back to life, and the boy named Valdred found himself captivated by the alraune in a slightly different way from the others.

It was love at first sight. A truly human emotion.

But it was still beyond the self-conscious watermelon to deny such a thing, for he had yet to even realize the fact.

He was certain that he could never hold romantic feelings for anyone—a being with no clear identity, he felt, had no such right.

†

Waldstein Castle, laboratory.

[I also confess than I am one of those drawn to her—in an entirely platonic sense, of course.]

"Hoh hoh. You also speak for the rest of us, Viscount Waldstein."

<Eek! There's so much competition! I really love Selim too!>

<Hahh...>

Watching the recorded footage through one of the monitors, Professor's speakers let out something that sounded like a sigh.

<It's no good. I've combed through all this past information about Doctor, but I can't find a single clue.>

This particular piece of footage was from a conversation Doctor had had with the viscount about Selim. At the time, it had been just a few years since Doctor's arrival at the castle. It was also:

<This is around the time when my memories begin...>

The being that the castle's residents called 'Professor' possessed no memories of her past before she had taken on this form. She knew that her main body was the skeleton inside her coffin. But she knew nothing about the face the skeleton used to wear, and the kind of vampire she was.

But she was happy.

Once it was determined that her skeleton was likely female, she collected a great deal of data in order to become feminine in character. Of course, a large majority of her sources were foreign animated series that some of the castle's vampires had imported.

Doctor had helped her along as she floundered without her memories. And though her skeleton would not regenerate flesh and blood, he created a coffin through which she could interact with the world around her.

At first, she was curious about her lost past. But as she grew accustomed to life in the caverns, she slowly began to lose interest. In fact, she began to worry that the restoration of her memories would somehow destroy her happy life with Doctor.

After all, the ordinary days she led in the lab were all she had, and the source of all her joy.

But now it was all falling to pieces.

Each time she recalled Doctor's words, her fears grew worse.

She began to wonder if, perhaps, she was also somehow connected to his problems. Professor desperately rummaged through the lab to find some clues as to Doctor's whereabouts.

'Doctor is going to come back,' she reassured herself, holding on to one last ray of hope.

†

The mountain path.

"To think you'd actually find me here..."

'I...'

"What's wrong? You're not here to just show me your face and leave, right? Though I actually can't see your face right now. Hah hah!"

'What am I so scared of?'

"C'mon, Rudi. Let's play. Just like old times."

'Why am I shaking?!"

Each time Theodosius spoke, Rudi's heart was rattled.

Part of the reason was hatred and anger.

His entire body was fueled by hostility, and his rage was infinitely greater than what it had been earlier that day against Ferret and Michael.

The hatred had festered within him for a full decade. But one moment of fear threatened to turn everything to naught.

'Ah... no...'

'Fire stakes out of the armor.'

'Pin his limbs to the ground.'

'Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.'

'Make him taste despair. Just like he did to me.'

'Make him taste even greater despair.'

'Pluck out his innards.'

'Massacre his friends as he watches.'

Every part of his body—every part of his mind—every memory stored in his heart—screamed out different orders to him, pumping bloodlust through his veins. He would soon have revenge.

But the soul of Rudi Wenders—the one who controlled the power held in his body—was, more than anything else, terrified by the sight of his nemesis.

He had stockpiled fury during his time as an Eater. He had made sport of vampires unrelated to his quest for revenge, killed, and consumed them.

He had gained power.

He had been so certain that he was strong enough.

He had been convinced that he had the power to toy with, murder, and devour the boy standing before him.

His mind tried to remind him again and again. But logic was not enough to sway the instinctive fear that had taken root in his heart.

'I want to run.'

Each time the words echoed in his head, his trembling worsened uncontrollably.

Each time he shook, the urge to turn tail and run threatened to overpower him.

The fear grew worse and worse, eventually taking over his thought processes entirely. If no one said anything to him, he would soon succumb to the terror and flee.

But the one who spoke to him, of course, was the boy he so feared.

"Hey... are you okay? Are you even going to be able to kill me like that?"

"Th-Theo..."

The weight of the fear would destroy Rudi's mind if he didn't respond. But the vampire was not the one who was holding this fear over him; it was Rudi's own psyche that was breaking from the inside out.

The act of calling his foe's name—if only in a mumbled gasp—very slightly alleviated his panic.

And that was enough.

Rudi swallowed bitterly and glared daggers at the boy before him.

His own heartbeat echoed through his armor.

The sound snapped the Eater back into reality.

'I'm alive.'

Though fear incarnate was standing before him, Rudi was still alive.

Though his nemesis was doing absolutely nothing, the act of confirming his own survival was of great significance to Rudi.

'I'm alive. I... I'm alive! Mom and Dad... and everyone... they're all dead. But I'm still alive. Yes. I'm still alive!'

The air around the gigantic suit of armor changed.

'I'm alive... But what for?

'...To make that bastard know despair!'

In the blink of an eye, a white stake was launched from the helm of the armor, where the wearer's eyes should have normally been. It flew straight toward the vampire, who was standing only a few meters away.

The stake had been aimed directly at the boy's face, but Doctor—Theodosius M. Waldstein—did not even twitch.

Just when it seemed that the stake would be driven through his skull, his face dissipated into fog.

As soon as the white projectile passed through where his face should have been, Theo reformed his head over his neck as though nothing had happened.

"Hah. Hah hah. That's an amazing toy you have there. But it's not going to work on me."

So casual was the boy's tone and grin that what little courage the armored man had mustered shattered to bits.

"Ah... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRGH!"

In an attempt to hide his fear, Rudi fired off one white stake after another.

He had slaughtered countless vampires and turned them to ash with this weapon. But the tried-and-true method had no effect on his foe. Though Rudi had faced many vampires who were capable of turning to fog, he had killed most of them before they could transform completely.

But the speed of Theo's transformation was unheard of. Though the transformations began only after Rudi had fired the stakes, the stakes had no time to connect before it was complete.

As Rudi began to panic, Theo said casually:

"If you think this is something, just wait 'til you see the castle's jester work her magic."

Rudi also had experience fighting vampires who were completely in fog form. But that was no problem once Theresia tore through the surrounding air with her silver whip.

It was only then that the Eater remembered that his partner was not by his side.

Although they did not constantly work as a pair, when working as a team, they were among the strongest of the Organization's dogs. It was an insulting moniker, but Rudi forced himself to accept it until the day he could tear out Theo's throat.

But now, Theresia—who was always there to accept that moniker by his side—was absent.

She was probably still on the island, but Rudi knew that by acting alone, he had put himself at a disadvantage. His panic worsened as her absence became more and more pronounced.

The vampire seemed to have read his fear. He tossed out an encouragement at his old friend.

"That can't be all you've got, Rudi. Those stakes aren't everything. You're strong enough to use that armor freely. You have years of experience and power from devouring all those vampires."

Theo snickered.

"Don't worry, Rudi. I know you've become stronger."

He smiled innocently as he spat words of pure poison, taking a step closer to Rudi.

"After all, we're friends, aren't we?"

His rage boiled over.

His bloodlust neared the breaking point.

But his fear overcame it all.

He could not even take a single step.

He could not take the first step to attacking the vampire and making him suffer. When his brain ordered his body to move, it froze and refused to budge. When his body attempted to step forward, his fears put everything to a halt.

Rudi was rooted to the spot. It was all he could do to force out a trembling voice. That was both his limit and the greatest bluff he could muster.

"I'm scared... I... I'm scared... Shit... But... but I swear... I... I'll... I'll... k-ki-ki..."

"You'll... what?" Theo repeated, his tone sounding threatening for the first time. "I can't hear you."

"Ah..."

To scream would be to admit defeat.

There was nothing resembling childlike innocence in Theo's voice. Rudi, who was without a doubt much stronger than Theo, found his will breaking.

"You'll... what? Oh! You were trying to say that you were going to kill me. It's okay, Rudi. If saying so makes you stronger, then say it all you like."

"Ah... Uwah..."

Theo's provocation pierced deep into his memories. In his mind, Rudi was again the helpless little child who had just lost everything dear to him. Standing before him, just like that day, was the never-changing vampire. The darkness reminded Rudi of that night, and the lights from the castle turned to the smell of fire that burned away at his will.

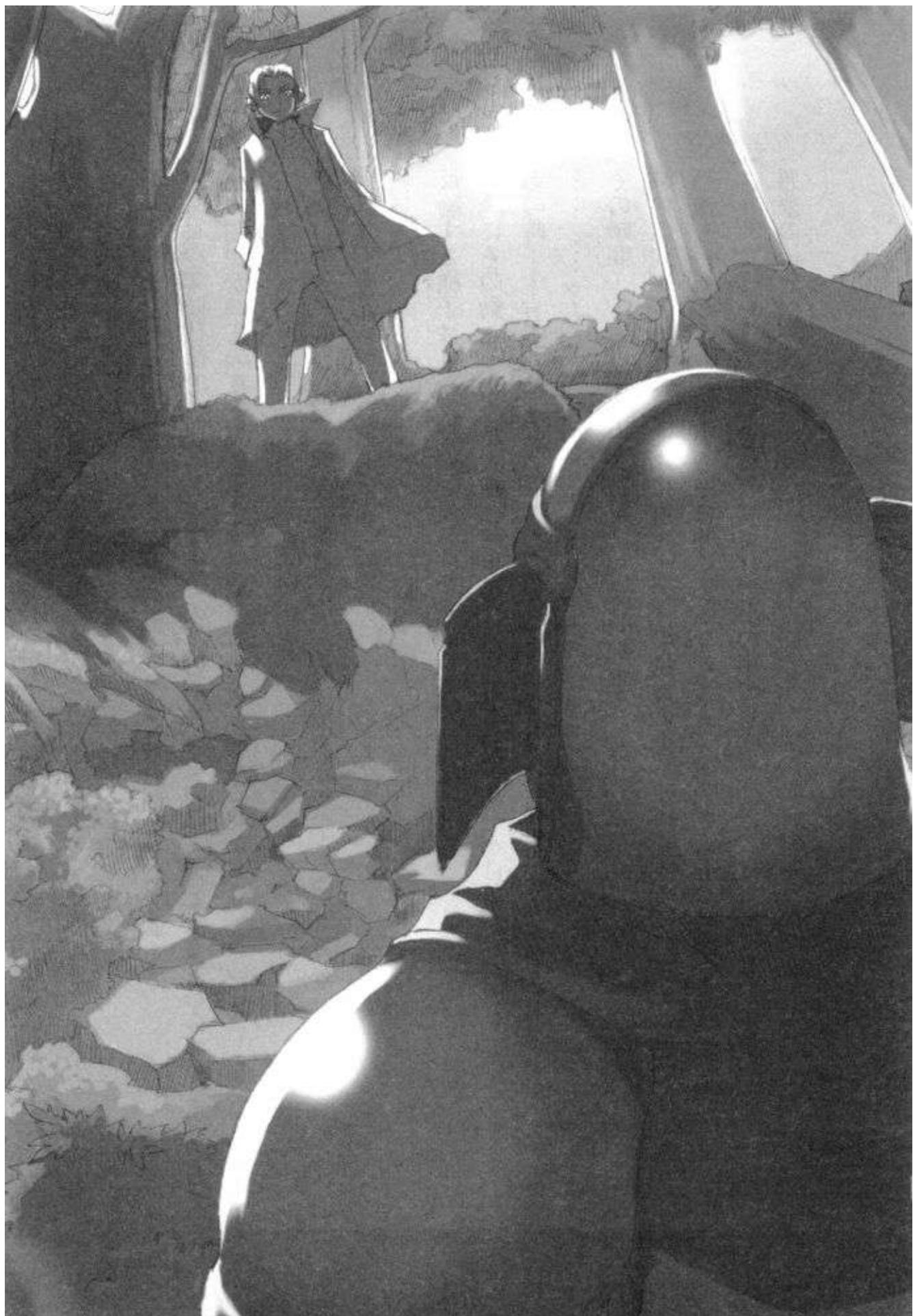
Theo sighed at the sight of his old friend being consumed by the past, and shook his head.

"Still so weak."

Rudi showed no sign of responding. The armor stood utterly still.

So Theo decided to drive the final nail in the coffin.

"Do you remember what your sister Elsa said that day?"



"...!"

The memories replaying in Rudi's mind came grinding to a halt.

The moment Theo mentioned his sister's name, it was as though time itself had frozen.

All his fear, his hatred, the sounds of the world around him, and even his breathing forgot the passage of time for a single second.

The name 'Elsa' was the trigger. His nightmares came to life once more. The final part of his memory.

His beloved sister. His sister, whom he loved more than even their parents.

In his memories, she was in the arms of the vampire before him. His fangs had been sunk into her neck. And the last words she ever spoke to Rudi—

Theo stood before him today, looking just as he did in Rudi's nightmares, and repeated:

"So... what you tell me now is going to decide if your sister will live or die. I'll kill her if you say you love her, and I'll kill her if you say you hate her. What are you going to do? Hah! Try and stop me if you can! Come on, try and save your sister! Ahaha! It's all on you now. How does it feel, holding your precious family's life in the palm of your hand? You could even say that you've subjugated her, just like a vampire! Ahahaha! Hahahahahaha!"

The vampire's thread of logic did not entirely make sense, but it was enough to etch his words into the boy's thoughts. It felt as though the sounds entering his ears were rattling his brain from the inside out.

The vampire soon stopped laughing, putting on the most gentle smile yet. He slowly demanded a response.

"Now... tell me your answer."

There was a story unfolding in his dream.

A re-enactment of his past, caused by the memories etched into his mind.

The beginning of his memories as an Eater—an avenger—being played back in reality before his very eyes.

The very moment the boy named Rudi gave up his humanity.

But this was different from his nightmares. Rudi tasted endless despair at the sheer realism of the recreation of his past. Though he had seen this image in his dreams again and again and again and again and again, the moment he heard the name 'Elsa', it dawned on him that dreams really were nothing more than that—dreams.

Reality was not so kind. It stirred Rudi's memories, forcibly bringing back his most painful memory.

In the memories, Rudi was trembling. He shook as he asked Theo:

"...Are you... going to... spare me...?"

It was as though something had ransacked his memories.

He had tried to put it away. He had tried to forget.

But that was all the more reason why he could never forget this moment.

Worse than the fact of his father's death, his mother's death,

Theo's betrayal,

Or having had to beg his nemesis for his life,

Was the agonizing fact that he had abandoned his beloved sister.

Fearing that his answer would lead to his sister's death, Rudi could not respond to Theo's question. Prioritizing his own life was all that he could do.

"Huh. I guess you love yourself more than you love your sister. ...Hey, Elsa. Say something. Say something to your sweet little brother. That self-centered brother who's just abandoned you."

Elsa turned her unfocused gaze to Rudi as though hypnotized.

And she went on to say:

"I... I wish... you never existed..."

"AAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

His scream echoed through the woods, threatening even to push away the festivities taking place not so far away.

"...!"

Taken aback for a moment by the intensity of Rudi's cry, Theo leapt back without thinking.

But he did not manage to widen the distance between them.

The gigantic suit of armor had charged forward almost simultaneously, closing the gap like a magnet.

"I wish... I WISH YOU NEVER EXISTED!"

"Ugh...!"

Catching sight of a stake being fired from the armor's helm, Theo quickly turned his head into fog to avoid the strike.

But he had not thought far enough.

Just before the stake made contact with Theo's head, Rudi snatched it out of the air with his right hand and drove it into Theo's chest.

"Urgh! Agh... Ack!"

So quick was the feint that Theo was too late to transform his chest into fog. The pain pulsating from the right side of his torso stopped even the transformation of his head.

'...I broke him.'

The moment Theo's nonchalance broke and his face contorted with pain, time around Rudi began to move again like gears that had been snapped together.

Part of the nightmare that terrorized him for years had been destroyed.

At the same time, his confidence in his skills as an Eater—the mind of a Hunter—finally returned in full force.

'...I made him feel agony!'

"Heh... Heh heh..."

He let out a stilted, trembling laugh, drawing air from the very depths of his lungs.

"Hah... Hah.... Ahahahahaha! Hahahahahahahahahaha! Ahahahahahahahahahaha!"

Using the terror he had been feeling up until just moments ago as a proverbial footstool, he laughed like a madman as Theo lay fallen on the mountain path.

"I get it. I get it now, Theo! Theo, Theo, Theo. Theodosius M. Waldstein! I see now. You can only turn parts of your body into fog at once! Ahahahaha! This is why you're acting so high-and-mighty and provoking me! Right? I'm right, aren't I?! And one more thing! You can only turn to fog for seconds at a time. It's all you can do to avoid projectiles and stakes! Am I wrong?"

Theo responded with a resounding silence.

It was essentially an act of acknowledging his weaknesses.

But in spite of the pain evident in his eyes, Theo put on a friendly grin.

"You're absolutely right, Rudi. But don't you think you're being too harsh on an old friend?"

"Shut up."

"I never hurt you personally, you know."

"SHUT UP!"

A gigantic, armored foot stomped down on Theo's shoulder. The same attack was used on Ferret earlier that day for the expressly calculated purpose of making her suffer; but this

time, Rudi lashed out without so much as thinking. The stake lodged in Theo's chest snapped, driving countless splintered pieces into his body.

Even tiny splinters of wooden stakes were powerful weapons against vampires. Theo was overcome by agony, rolling down the slope while squirming like a bisected worm.

"Gah... Hah... Hah... Heh heh... That... really hurts, Rudi..." Doctor gasped, but he quickly put aside his look of pain and once more flashed Rudi a casual smile.

"What are you going to do now, Theo? Turn into a flock of bats and disappear? Transform into a wolf to try and maul me? Try to hypnotize me to do your bidding? Are you going to try and drink my blood? Or... or... would you beg like a pathetic dog for me to spare your life? Just like—just like I did back then?"

Though Rudi was so quiet his voice was almost at a whisper, each and every word he uttered was clearly full of hatred. As though he was desperately holding back the urge to let loose all his bloodlust, killing Theo instantly.

"Ahaha... Don't degrade yourself like that, Rudi. You weren't pathetic."

"There's no use trying to provoke me. All you have to do is scream. I'll tear off your limbs and force you to watch as I make your beloved friends and family die long, painful deaths. And then, I'll spend the next ten... no, hundred years... making you experience all the agony this world has to offer before finally killing you. I'll make you regret having been born a sturdy creature like a vampire until the moment you die!"

The avenger's threats were merciless. But Theo looked up at the night sky from the ground and smiled at Rudi.

"Heh... You know what would hurt me most, Rudi? Losing my old friend."

"Then you won't have anything to worry about. You never had any to begin with." Rudi replied, once more trampling down. He put one foot over Theo's gut and slowly put weight into his leg. He wanted to hear the sound of Theo's ribs breaking and see the moment he vomited blood as his organs were crushed.

There was a sickening noise as red foam began spewing from Theo's mouth.

The sight brought Rudi unparalleled joy, but he stomped down on Theo over and over again in an attempt to hide the strange feeling of emptiness in the corner of his heart.

Each time his hated nemesis cried out in pain, Rudi reaffirmed his own strength.

And each time he was reminded of his foe's frailty, annoyance sprouted in his heart.

"Now I know... you're nothing but a pathetic excuse for a vampire! Shit! The werewolves I faced today look stronger than you! But you... you took away everything from me! A powerless vampire like you! I lost everything to a disgustingly weak vampire like you!"

One kick after another after another after another after another after another. Theo's white lab coat was stained with blood, covering his body like a beautiful red cloak. Rudi kicked him again and again and again and drove a stake through him and trampled on him, stake and all.

This was already beyond torture; it was a drawn-out execution. And yet Rudi always made sure to avoid Theo's head and heart—his sense of reason was still intact.

But once Rudi stopped kicking Theo in order to conserve his strength, the mangled vampire began to howl with laughter.

"Ahahahaha! Hahahahahahaha!"

With each laugh, Theo's body changed. Rudi could not believe his eyes.

Each time the boy laughed, the wounds on his body faded. Lacerations, bruises, and broken bones disappeared one by one.

It was much too quick a process to be classified as regeneration. The countless splinters wedged in his body were expelled as though they had crawled out of their own free will. His torn sinews wove themselves back together cell by cell, restoring Theo's movements.

The blood that Theo had lost—now hardened—remained where it was. But the blood that was on the surface of his body was quickly re-absorbed back into him. Theo then went on to turn a part of himself into fog—the part upon which Rudi's foot lay—and took to his feet in one inhuman motion.

He turned half his body into a flock of bats and leapt up as though the bats were lifting up the rest of his body. Theo then easily landed on the ground about ten meters from Rudi.

"Aha... Hahahaha... What an idiot... You're such an idiot, Rudi."

He turned his neck as though testing his restored health, and looked directly at Rudi.

"You know, I spent years studying ways to make vampires immortal—ways for us to overcome our weaknesses. I vivisected countless vampires, and I even used myself as a guinea pig."

Flicking his bloodstained clothes, Theo taunted:

"Rudi, you can't hurt me permanently with attacks that weak. And one thing: How many more stakes do you have left to fire? You couldn't have an *infinite* supply in there. And if you've already used some of them on someone else... you should be running out right about now."

Rudi was silent at the sight of Theo's incredible regenerative ability.

But a moment later, an overjoyed voice escaped the suit of armor.

"You shouldn't be worrying over how many stakes I have left. And as for your regeneration speed... I'm actually happy, Theo."

He had overcome his fear of the vampire. All Rudi saw was the image of Theo from moments earlier, his face contorted in pain.

"Now I can kill you over and over again."

There was a clatter and a click from the armor's vambraces.

His gauntlets popped outward at the elbows, revealing a pair of thin hidden blades.

Although they were only the length of pocket knives, the blades were forged in beautiful arcs fit for full-length swords.

"I'd heard that Carnald Strassburg liked little contraptions like that, but it's almost a joke compared to the stake-shooting mechanism he built into that armor. ...I guess those knives must be part-silver, but this is really too bad, Rudi. Silver won't have any effect on me."

"That doesn't matter. I'll be happy enough tearing off your limbs with these knives."

From the promptness of his response, it was likely that Rudi's threat was meant to be taken literally. The flippant grin on Theo's face disappeared, giving way to a different kind of smile.

His childlike attitude was nowhere to be found. His eyes shone, humanity having utterly drained from his expression.

"Then just try it. But we might get interrupted here. Let's find ourselves a better spot."

Theo was not growing nervous by any measure. His suggestion was little more than the act of a cat finally taking a stance to kill the rebellious mouse it had been toying with. The air around him grew tense.

But it was all broken in an instant.

"FOUND HIM!"

Several oblivious cries shook the woods, destroying the tension between the combatants. A voice even more childlike than Theo's had been exploded into their presence.

"Heeeeey! I found him! I found Doctor!"

"Wow, I've never seen Doctor not wearing white before."

"No... I think... that must be blood..."

Following the freeloaders of Waldstein Castle were a girl dressed like a jester, a boy with green hair, and a bespectacled girl following right next to the green-haired boy.

The instant Doctor caught sight of them, his eyes visibly swelled with fear.

But fortunately—or unfortunately—Rudi was so distracted by the vampires' sudden arrival that he did not notice the change in his nemesis.

†

Waldstein Castle Laboratory.

The festivities must have already begun, but there was no sign of Doctor's return.

Professor had combed through many more videos and archives, but she could not find anything of particular use. She sometimes turned to check the live footage being fed from all over the island, but she could not see him on any of the cameras. In fact, there were very few people showing up on the screens now. It was as though humanity had vanished entirely from anywhere that wasn't the heart of the festival.

Professor was stumped. She sighed worriedly and went to Doctor's desk in a corner of the room.

<Oh, Doctor... I know you might scold me for this later, but you left my lid flipped open! We can call it even now!>

Though she felt sorry for having to do so, Professor reached for a locked drawer.

There was a crunch. Professor's arm quickly began to rifle through the distorted drawer.

<Oh?>

There was a photograph partially sticking out from a notebook.

Thinking it unusual, Professor gently reached out and grabbed the picture.

<This is Doctor and... um... I wonder who this could be?>

The photograph seemed to have been taken in this very laboratory. Its subjects were Doctor and a girl. The girl looked to be slightly older than he was, and there was a somewhat downcast look in her eyes.

She was an unfamiliar face to Professor. The photograph was likely from the time before her memories began.

<I wonder... could this be... the old me?>

With trepidation, Professor began to search for more information about the girl. But the only clue she found was the note scrawled on the back of the photograph.

'I've printed out another copy of the photo of myself and Theo as per the viscount's request.
-Elsa'

<Elsa... Elsa...?>

Professor struggled for a moment, trying to match up the name on the note to the face in the photograph. But she soon turned her body from side to side in defeat.

<Ohh... I can't remember a thing!>

But holding on to the hope that the photograph might provide her with some sort of clue, Professor decided that she would show it to the viscount or another vampire.

<Wouldn't it be wonderful if this pretty girl was really me?>

Professor took a magnet from a whiteboard in the corner of the room and fixed the photograph onto one of her arms.

It felt as though Doctor was right by her side. Professor grew slightly more hopeful.

Not yet knowing what was taking place aboveground,

Not yet knowing the true identity of the girl in the photograph...

†

Somewhere along a thoroughfare on Growerth.

The street was eerily quiet, deserted and lit at regular intervals by blinding streetlights.

The countless eyes shining from the fluttering darkness glared in unison at the being at the center of the shadows.

Until just moments ago, the eyes had been smoldering with fury and hatred. But now those emotions were replaced by a sense of sadistic joy.

Surrounded by the innumerable eyes, Shizune Kijima closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Though she was by no means crippled as though trampled upon by a suit of armor, Shizune was clearly injured grievously. She was covered in cuts that would not heal, blood spouting from every wound.

When she was first surrounded by the flock of bats, Shizune had dodged the dancing silver whip. But her advantage was quickly lost.

Melhilm, in the form of countless bats, tore at her from every direction. Each attack was ruthlessly directed at her eyes. And despite the fact that his attacks had never once fully connected as he intended, his abilities worked in flawless conjunction with Theresia's Eater abilities.

The dense clump of bats was darkness incarnate.

If Shizune focused, she could have easily cut down the creatures that continued to target her eyes. But each time she resolved to either attack or defend against them, the silver whip cut through the shadows and made its way toward her.

The darkness clawed at her and invaded her line of sight.

The sound of countless wingbeats concealed Theresia's footsteps. The movements of the great flock of bats confounded her sense of direction.

So widely were the bats spread that even Theresia was partially blinded by their masses. But her whips struck true, perhaps thanks to her ability to sense vampires—or perhaps because Melhilm was signaling her somehow.

Shizune, meanwhile, sensed Melhilm from every direction. But Theresia's presence continued to elude her.

It was a one-sided battle where her foe could locate her with pinpoint accuracy while Shizune herself was helpless to counter. The mass of darkness blinded her as it attacked.

The assault continued for some time.

Then, the blow that would decide the battle was driven into Shizune's thigh.

The tip of Theresia's whip tore through cloth, cut past her thighbone, and lodged itself in her leg. A splash of red lit up the blackness around Shizune.

"...!"

Swallowing a scream, Shizune took hold of the whip buried in her thigh and drew out the silver tip from her flesh.

"...Gotcha..." The former Eater chuckled, covered in cold sweat.

The darkness parted slightly, creating a tunnel of bats leading straight to Theresia.

But in spite of Shizune's grip on her weapon, Theresia could not have looked more nonchalant.

"Maybe it's because you're a former Eater, but you rely too much on your ability to sense vampires. I'll take care not to reproduce your mistakes myself in the future." She said plainly.

Theresia then lightly pulled on the whip. Shizune's entire body was rattled by the impact. Although she just managed to avoid being dragged along with it, the movement made clear the difference in their respective abilities.

The bats gathered next to Theresia, and quickly took on the form of the sneering Melhilm.

"This is all you have to show me? I'm almost disappointed. But unlike you mongrel dogs, Theresia's prey was carefully selected. She is a perfect Eater, raised on the most efficient diet of victims."

Theresia was as good as being treated like livestock, but she did not seem to care.

Shizune's spirit must have been broken by now, Melhilm thought, but she was still sneering as though he and Theresia were nothing but ingredients for her next meal.

"Mongrels, huh." She said to herself, her smile twisting further.

Annoyed by the sight, Melhilm spat,

"...Enough of this. Kill her."

"Yes, sir." Theresia answered mechanically, hauling back her whip and retrieving the end from Shizune's grip. Realizing that there was no point in attempting a tug-of-war match, Shizune relented easily.

The whip bolted back to Theresia, then disappeared in the blink of an eye.

With a sharp crack, the pointed tip again approached Shizune, several times faster than it was when Theresia had pulled it back.

Her thigh muscles torn apart by silver, Shizune was unable to avoid the strike.

She didn't even have time to withdraw her grin before the silver glint pierced her chest.

"...It's over. Hmph. I'd wanted to land the killing blow myself, but some things just can't be helped."

Shizune lay spread-eagle on the ground, her body slowly turning to ash. Melhilm threw her a disinterested glance and turned away.

"Let us be off, Theresia. There is no need to devour this one."

"Yes, sir."

Theresia also showed no sign of emotion at having murdered the vampire.

Melhilm took several steps forward.

"We must be on our way now. If I'd known things would be so simple, I'd never have requested support from Zygmunt—"

"Hm?"

They froze.

Melhilm was just about to finish speaking. Theresia was just about to turn around, having realized that Shizune's presence was not at all diminishing.

They were both lightly struck on the back. The impact soon gave way to sharp bursts of pain that assailed their entire bodies.

"...It can't be!"

"...!"

When they turned, they saw Shizune standing on the road.

They were so close that they could almost feel her breath on their skin.

Shizune was smiling self-deprecatingly, standing just within arm's length. How had she gotten so close when her thigh was injured? And before that, how had she survived the blow to the chest?

Melhilm was lost in panicked confusion, but the answer was simple.

"Yeah... you're right, Melhilm."

Both he and Theresia had forgotten one important fact.



Thinking of Shizune as an Eater-turned-vampire, they fought her as they would an Eater—a human being with enhanced strength and reflexes that could overpower vampires.

"I'm an Eater. I'm a worthless mongrel who eats the flesh of my enemies and steals away their powers."

And so, Melhilm and Theresia had underestimated Shizune's abilities as a vampire.

"That's why... I've always been pretty good at stealing other people's techniques."

They never realized the fact that there was single a bat flapping in the air, high above them. Shizune's heart, in the form of a bat, was looking down on them as though watching a pair of clowns in a performance.

"...!"

Theresia quickly lashed out with a kick, but Shizune's body turned into fog. The attack would not connect.

"You little—!"

Though surprised by Shizune turning into fog, Melhilm made to transform back into a flock of bats. Swallowing the anger he felt at Shizune turning into fog—an ability he did not possess—Melhilm prepared to devour the fog in the form of his many bats.

But just as his transformation began, another mass of bats rose up as though in a wall after his own black flock.

'What?!"

The bats originating from Shizune chased down Melhilm's bats one by one, plunging their fangs into the mouths of his bats and tearing out the tongues of their enemies.

Melhilm understood instinctively as he lost his advantage; at this rate, his own bats would be eaten by Shizune's. He quickly gathered back the intact bats and reformed his body—though there were no pieces missing from himself, his face looked gaunter and his skin was pale.

Shizune followed suit, gathering her bats back to her own body.

"You two forgot one important thing. Especially you, Melhilm. You're a pretty poor excuse for a vampire."

Energized by the feast of the bats, Shizune Kijima smiled ruthlessly.

"It's nighttime, Melhilm."

She sneered at Theresia, swallowing her confidence whole.

"And you know what that means, right? This is the hour of vampires, little girl."

"...Ugh..."

Theresia's practiced nonchalance faltered.

'I can't believe I let my guard down...'

When she first realized that Shizune had dipped her own legs in hot asphalt and fled, Theresia had sensed something about her—a sort of aggravating tenacity.

But her own overwhelming superiority had robbed her of that sense of caution. No Eater would allow themselves to relax if all they had done was pierce the target's heart. Theresia bit her lip.

"I bet you've only taken down vampires the Organization assigned to you." Shizune said with a sympathetic look, "you've only ever fought vampires they knew you'd be able to defeat, in terms of strengths and weaknesses. You have a lot of experience in battle, but you've never really been in trouble, have you?"

Without even listening to Shizune, Theresia once more prepared to strike with her whip.

Shizune, however, did not react. She looked up into the air with her hands behind her back, as though about to recite her life story.

"It was the same for me. But for the past year, I was all alone. That one year's all the difference between you and me."

Something about the scene struck Melhilm as odd.

And by the time he looked down at his subordinate's feet, it was already too late.

As Theresia prepared to attack the defenseless Shizune, she leaned back to prepare for the strike. The moment she was at the furthest point, something grabbed hold of her ankles.

"...?!"

Theresia lost her balance and nearly toppled over. But her reflexes allowed her to push off the ground with her hand and leap backwards.

Shizune did not miss her chance.

With frightening speed, she closed the gap between herself and Theresia while the latter was in midair. Shizune's arms were missing below the elbows, and a pair of hands were limp on the ground where Theresia's feet had been only moments earlier.

'Impossible!'

Realizing that Shizune had copied his own technique, Melhilm let out a silent scream. She couldn't have so quickly mastered the art of turning her hands into bats and exercising control over them. He narrowed his eyes and looked closely.

'That bitch!'

The two arms sticking out of the ground were not completely separate from Shizune. The bats were connected through the shadow cast under her feet, reaching even to the ground under Theresia.

In other words, the arms had never been separated from Shizune. Of course, putting the bats in the distance into the form of her own hands must have taken a great deal of effort, Melhilm theorized. And by the time he reached this thought, Theresia had been caught in Shizune's grasp.

As soon as Shizune brushed up against the flock of bats, they returned to her body and gave back her hands. With them, she tightly took hold of Theresia's whip arm.

"Ugh..."

Theresia could feel her bones creaking under the strain. She tried to lash out with a kick, but Shizune's knee came forward and stopped her.

Although Theresia was still physically stronger, their positions closed the gap in strength to its limit. If Shizune knew any Judo or Aikido techniques, at this point she could easily overcome Theresia's raw power.

But in spite of her great advantage, Shizune paused to say to the Eater:

"Traugott-sensei told me; one cycle of seasons is enough to change a human completely."

Her eyes glinted as she put even more pressure into the arms holding Theresia's.

"And that goes even more so for vampires!"

The moment Shizune broke out into a cold grin, Theresia saw her chance. She quickly leaned her head back for a headbutt.

But the moment she did so, an animal's jaws were clamped around her neck.

"?! ...Ugh... Ack...!"

"You know, once I see power, I can't go without making it mine."

Melhilm made to jump in, but he quickly stopped.

"Cause I'm a worthless mongrel Eater, that's why."

A wolf's muzzle was sticking out of Shizune's chest—the spot Theresia had pierced with her whip earlier—and was holding Theresia by the neck. Although neither Melhilm or Theresia had any way of knowing, that was a technique of Mage's that Shizune had fallen victim to the previous year.

"I finally got back at you for earlier. We're even now."

Before even finishing her sentence, Shizune let go of Theresia's arm, and with the latter's neck still in the jaws of the muzzle, kicked her body.

Her free hand slid down toward the wolf's muzzle, but Shizune withdrew the jaws. If she had been a second later to do so, Theresia's carotid artery would have been slashed open.

Shizune jumped backwards and licked her lips with Melhilm and Theresia locked in her sights.

"It's dinnertime."

Her smile was cold as ice. She would probably carry out her threat word-for-word.

Melhilm felt a chill run down his spine as he remembered their encounter the previous year.

But Shizune's feast was interrupted by a sudden intrusion.

The sound of a car's engines reached her ears.

The headlights illuminated them from the distance. The honk of a klaxon signaled them to move.

Not even blinking at the noise, Shizune elegantly walked over to Theresia. She intended to drink the Eater's blood before finally devouring Melhilm.

Melhilm considered transforming once more to escape, but once he saw the state of the car racing toward them, a twisted grin rose to his lips.

Shizune was certain that the car would either stop or swerve to avoid them. And even if the driver could not, she knew that she had enough time to get out of the way.

But when the car was within spitting distance, her ears caught the sound of the engine growling even louder than before.

"...?!"

She leapt into the air with her uninjured leg and jumped sideways, glancing at the source of the noise.

A mass of metal blitzed past the spot she had been standing in a moment ago, before skidding to a stop several dozen meters away.

"...Probably not a drunk driver, huh."

She knew this was no accident because she took note of Melhilm, standing across the road from her. A confident grin had returned to his face.

At the same time, she heard something else approaching from the distance.

Throughout the course of the battle, the island's thoroughfare had been strangely devoid of vehicles. But it was as though the all the absent cars were returning at once, racing toward Shizune without caring that she was on the road. The cars slowed as they drew near, ignoring lanes as they parked in a formation around her.

"Hmph. It's a good thing I requested support." Melhilm sighed. Crowds of people disembarked from the vehicles.

Although Shizune did not sense any vampires among them, the people all looked at her with empty eyes, carrying metal pipes and bladed objects.

It was a group of humans plucked indiscriminately from the city. Men and women, young and old. They stepped out of the cars one by one, standing like a wall before Melhilm and Theresia.

Some of the people were even carrying shotguns. They were not a group composed only of ordinary civilians. Although things would be easiest for Shizune if she killed them all, that was one path she wanted to avoid. She had no qualms about taking humans' lives, but to do so would be to turn the viscount and the island's vampires against herself.

'Is this subjugation?'

Because she could not sense any vampires from the group, Shizune supposed that these were ordinary humans under a vampire's subjugation.

"...Impressive. Is this your handiwork, Melhilm?"

"Hah. I admit such a feat is possible for me, if I scatter a flock of bats at once." Melhilm said casually, sure once more of his superiority. He gestured with his chin to Theresia and ordered her to retreat, and did the same himself.

"Keep her well occupied, Zygmunt."

"Stop right there!"

Shizune tried to chase after her fleeing meal, but the wall of humans grew larger and larger as more cars arrived on the scene. Shizune would need to leap a great height to make it over, but with her thigh grazed with silver, it would be a difficult jump to make. And even if she transformed into fog or a flock of bats, Theresia and Melhilm could probably outrun her.

But before all that, did Shizune have any way of escaping her predicament? Would she have to transform into a flock of bats, or would she have to kill the people after all, with the understanding that she would turn the viscount against herself?

As she continued to ponder, the crowd drew nearer as though attempting to suffocate her. The sight of Melhilm and Theresia escaping made Shizune anxious, tempting her to make an unpleasant decision.

The shotguns were now being aimed at her. The words 'justified self-defense' rose to mind and refused to leave her thoughts.

'I'll kill about ten of them as soon as he fires.' She said to herself.

But at that moment, something descended upon her from overhead.

A gigantic, human-shaped projectile landed without even a signaling gunshot.

Accompanying the gust from the impact was a man. So quick was his approach that Shizune did not notice him until he was right before her eyes.

Even in spite of his powerful presence, she had failed to notice him until now.

At first, Shizune thought that the man, possessed of a chilling presence, was the one behind the subjugation. But he grinned viciously at a man holding a shotgun and drew a firearm of his own, reciting a line straight out of a movie.

"Pointing a gun at a woman? And you seriously call yourself a real gunman?"

A moment later, a silent projectile was launched. The shotgun was knocked out of the hands of the subjugated human. The crowd recoiled in shock.

But as soon as it became apparent that the wielder of the shotgun had been unharmed, they reached out to take hold of the fallen weapon.

But the mysterious gunman was not so courteous that he would give them the chance.

The sound of something cutting through the air shot forth from the barrel of his gun, and the projectile proceeded to sink its fangs into the neck of the man with the shotgun.

As soon as the bat released the man's neck, he went limp and fell to the pavement.

"Tranquilizer shots ain't really my style, but, well..." The blond-haired, blue-eyed man mumbled with a scratch of the head, "gotta do what Mister Gerhardt says, y'know?"

Though the man could have easily blown off his target's head, he suppressed the urge and instead elected to overwrite the subjugation imposed upon the human. It would be a maddening process, Yellow Bridgestone thought to himself, as he recalled his conversation with his brother.

Just after instructing Yellow to look for Melhilm, Ishibashi had added:

"Also, I'm passing on a message from Sir Gerhardt. [Please do not bring the islanders to harm, if at all possible]. This isn't an order, by the way. He bowed his head and made a personal request. So... I'm going to echo his sentiment. Please."

The gunman chortled at the memory.

"Pfft. Can't believe my stupid brother actually said 'please'." He mumbled with a laugh, and fired off one silent shot after another.

Each crisp cut of the air was accompanied by a bat. The living projectiles tore into the necks of the humans one by one.

"And that thing with the 'if at all possible'... So if I do get people hurt, that's as good as telling everyone something pathetic like 'Oh, I'm too weak to get this job done properly'!"

The bats flew in perfectly straight lines, landing on the humans' necks with incredible accuracy.

None were exempt from this show of precision; those who were lunging toward Yellow and Shizune, those who were aiming shotguns, and those who were carrying crossbows were alike taken down with equal effort.

He had an infinite supply of ammunition.

The gunman, who did not even need time to reload, was a walking cheat key. He continued to fire away, and at the same time turned and spoke to Shizune for the first time.

"Yo, babe. I happened to see you surrounded here and thought I'd play a bit of knight-in-shining-armor. But, uh... who are you, anyway?"

†

The mountain path.

"Oh. Didn't think I'd run into all of you here."

The first words out of Doctor's mouth were a simple greeting.

But the incongruity of his tone confused the vampires who had searched for him all evening.

His elderly manner of speech had been replaced by one more suitable to his appearance, and it was as though his entire body was emitting a chill.

"Doctor? Is that... really you?" Val asked, reacting to Doctor's tone—so different from what he remembered. Why was he dressed in red instead of his white lab coat? Who was the armored man? Val had many things he wanted to ask, but his first question was the most pressing.

Perhaps, Val thought hopefully, Doctor would quickly revert to his old self with a hearty chuckle and a 'Young man, do I look any different to you?'. Nothing about him indicated that such a thing would happen, but Val could not let go of his wishful thought.

And as though in reply, Val's hopes were cruelly dashed.

"'Doctor', huh. I don't care about nicknames like that anymore. In fact, just listening to that name annoys me."

"What...?"

Val's heart sank.

"Wait! Stop! Stop, Doctor! Something's not right here! Something's not right! What's happened to you?!" The jester asked, also aware that something was wrong.

The other vampires looked around at one another awkwardly. Selim nervously clung to Val's sleeve.

The man in the armor standing before Doctor was watching without a sound, having yet to understand what was happening. But he remained as guarded as ever, and his hostility toward Doctor was plain even to those around him.

Doctor glanced at the armored man several times as he replied to the vampires' questions with a sigh.

"Heh heh heh... I guess I'll have to introduce myself again. Hello, everyone! My name is Theodosius. Theodosius M. Waldstein! Please, call me Theo."

"Theo... Uh... Waldstein...?"

The more Doctor spoke, the more confused Val became. He gaped, but Theo snickered callously.

"That's right. Though I'm not directly related to Gerhardt. We're very distant relatives. It's been quite a few years now since I started taking advantage of the fact that I share his name."

The usual Doctor was nowhere to be found. Even at his most condescending, Doctor never failed to show some degree of warmth.

"You see, this island is the perfect place for me to hide from people like *him*. People who are bent on revenge."

"...Revenge? Doctor... d-did you do something to that man?" The jester asked, taking note of the armored man's bloodlust.

The childlike vampire's answer was all too simple.

"Haha! I just butchered his family and friends, that's all."

The armored man said nothing. It was as though he was building up his anger in preparation for a single, concentrated show of rage.

During the man's silence, Doctor smiled innocently and continued:

"That's not all. I happened to kill a lot of people before that, too. I don't remember exactly how many, but... at least four digits' worth, I'd bet."

Val and the others could not hide their disbelief. Doctor was indeed a vampire, but even then his claims were too difficult to swallow. They wanted to believe that, even now, Doctor was in the midst of some sort of outlandish experiment.

Although Val had only met Doctor today, the latter had suggested to him many paths to the future and given him confidence. Val desperately wanted to believe in the boy.

But the words that shattered their hopes came from within their midst.

"So it's true, then. You're... the mass murderer." Said one of the freeloader vampires.

Doctor's eyes narrowed for a moment at the mention of the words. He then said in a tone both lonely and nostalgic,

"It's been a while since I've heard anyone call me that. I wonder if the Organization's still after me."

"You're lying, Doctor! You're lying! You never had any reason to kill anyone!" The jester cried, as though trying to deny Doctor's claim—trying to deny the existence of Theodosius M. Waldstein. But Doctor's reply was simple.

"Do I need a reason? I'm a vampire. Maybe it hasn't gotten through to you yet, but we vampires have the right to do whatever we want with humans. But if you're curious about why I went so far as to kill them..."

Doctor trailed off and paused dramatically, preparing to enjoy the vampires' reaction to his next words:

"...I killed them because it was fun."

The innocence evaporated from his eyes. Doctor turned his gaze to the sky with a look of euphoria.

"It was so exciting. That feeling of superiority I got from toying with their lives. You don't understand, do you? But in the end, I bit off more than I could chew. I was hunted by the Organization, so I came to this island. I fooled Gerhardt into letting me stay, and threw away my name and my past. And I even hid away my true nature." He said, sounding particularly pleased with his final statement, before closing his eyes and continuing with a disappointed expression.

"But now that Rudi's come all this way to find me, I can't stay here anymore. But I wanted to see my old friend just once more before I left."

Doctor turned to the armored man as he spoke, but the 'old friend' remained silent.

The jester, meanwhile, seemed to be speaking even in Rudi's place. She emphatically mentioned the vampire who was awaiting Doctor's return.

"Then what about Professor?! Doctor, do you have any idea how worried she is?! Do you?! I don't know what you're planning, but if you're going to run away, you have to at least take her with you! You have to!"

It was a gamble of sorts, referring to Professor.

It was one final gamble for the prize of returning the boy to his old self as Doctor.

But the jester's gamble ended in defeat, rather appropriate for someone of her appearance.

"Oh. That piece of scrap?"

"What...?!"

"Who cares about that thing? I fooled around with it for my immortality research, but even that's starting to get boring now." Doctor said with a chuckle. There was no hesitation in his eyes.

The moment she heard Doctor's callous response, the jester walked up to him and swung back her right hand.

She then flung her palm forward, directly at the boy's face.

But there was no crisp sound to signal impact.

The moment the jester's hand reached Doctor, he transformed only his face into fog. The jester slapped nothing but thin air.

But she did not stop. She swung her hand again and again, trying in spite of her failures.

"Stupid Doctor! Stupid, stupid, stupid! Professor's really worried about you, you know?! You know how much she loves you! So why?! Why?! And even if you really didn't like her back... you could have at least told us a white lie!"

'Doctor... he can't really mean it, can he?'

Val didn't know how to react to the sight of the jester's tear-streaked face.

This small part of the world—one he had only recently accepted—was changing rapidly. Though Doctor was unchanged in appearance, it was as though his very soul had been replaced. Val reflected upon this sudden transformation.

Perhaps he himself was very much like Doctor, changing his appearance and character at will.

'No... That's not it...'

Though Val was distracted by his musings about himself, he decided it was more important to turn his attention to the meaning of Doctor's words. He stepped forward to question him further.

But before Val could say a word, Doctor said lazily, as though answering the jester's questions were a tiring task,

"It's all such a bother."

He would bring everything to an end between himself, the armored man who radiated bloodlust, Val, and the jester.

"Say, Rudi? Feel free to slaughter anyone who lives in my castle."

"...What?" The jester gasped, stopping mid-slap.

So shocking were Doctor's words that the air itself froze.

"You can kill off the Waldsteins and these vampires here. Then we'll finally be even, right? We can be friends again. Just like old times."

Val, the jester, and the freeloader vampires all turned to the armored man, shocked into silence.

In spite of the many gazes thrown his way by his natural prey, the suit of armor was silent. He remained so for some time, before finally addressing the vampires who had come to find Doctor.

"...You know... I wanted to kill all of Theo's friends. All of you."

The vampires were first surprised by the youthful voice that came from the armor. Then they found themselves battling a terrible chill at the content of his claim. No one, after all, would want to be on the receiving end of such undeserved hostility.

"But now... to be honest, I don't know. If you vampires decide to turn against Theo, then I'll consider you my allies. But let me warn you. If you decide to protect Theo, I'll slaughter you all as he watches."

On the surface, it seemed that there was no emotion in his voice. But each and every utterance was dripping with hatred for Theodosius. Even Rudi's near-inaudible mumbling was full of bloodlust.

Val's illusionary body trembled at the sight, shaken by an unknowable fear.

But Doctor seemed to be amused by it all. He shook his head with a childlike laugh.

"Ahahaha! That sounds interesting. Yeah... go ahead and side with Rudi if you think you can beat me. I was just about to take care of all of you anyway. Val and Selim and the rest... I was just thinking about killing you for an experiment."

His cheerful grin instantly took on the sharpness of a fine blade. It felt as though Doctor's gaze would tear Val and Selim to pieces. Under the dim lamps, his eyes glinted like those of a ravenous wolf, burning Val with the sheer force embedded within.

'Is Doctor... serious?'

So terrifying was Doctor's gaze that Val was forced to avert his eyes. This was not the gaze of the eccentric child he had seen earlier that day—it was clearly the look of a murderer. It was similar to the way Val perceived Watt without his sunglasses, but Doctor's eyes were incomparably colder and more vicious than Watt's had ever been.

Val was struck by fear at the sight, but what bothered him more was the way Selim would react. She must have known Doctor for much longer than he did. Doctor's betrayal must have broken her heart more than it did Val's.

Worried, Val quickly turned back to look at Selim.

But he came face-to-face with her usual expression: a melancholy but gentle look.

Had she not understood the situation fully, Val wondered, but his suspicions were quickly proven incorrect.

"It's all right." Selim whispered with a lonely smile, so quiet that only Val could hear, "no one in this world is truly evil, Val. We... we just have to believe... and everything will be all right."

'What does she mean, we have to believe? In what Doctor just said? Or is she saying that this Doctor is a fake and that we should believe in the one from before?'

Val grew more and more confused, ultimately unable to choose a side. He was gripped by the weight of the pressure bearing down upon them all.

'I don't care about choosing sides. ...I hate this. Doctor, please... please, it's not too late to say you were just joking. Please...'

But it was as though his wishes were directly insulted.

"Hraaaaaahh!"

The helm of the armor was loudly assaulted by a flying drop kick.

"...Wha...? What..."

The first to gasp in confusion was none other than Doctor himself.

The armored man standing before him fell prey to the sudden attack and lost his balance, falling to his knees.

And as though waving away the heavy air that had been clouding over them, the man who had landed the attack—one of the freeloader vampires—cried out impatiently:

"Blah blah blah blah blah. I don't get a word of what you're saying, Doc. We're just gonna side with whoever's giving us our money. Am I right?"

The other freeloaders chimed in in agreement.

"Hell yeah! Doctor, you're the only one who can open the safe."

"And if Doc's really that mass murderer everyone's been talking 'bout, we'd be safer off siding with him."

"We live by the rule of siding with the strong."

"And if we stick with Doctor, the others at the castle're gonna side with us, too."

"The maids, too!"

"Nice and simple. All this stuff about tragic pasts and good and evil just makes my head hurt."

The vampires moved to stand behind Doctor as though they had been in agreement from the very beginning.

"G-guys...?!" Val cried quickly, but the freeloaders did not hesitate.

"Kiddo. Val. Remember who we were working for before?"

"Watt was one hell of a petty villain."

"And Doctor might be a villain, but he looks like a seriously serious guy, totally different from Watt. You get what I'm saying?"

The vampires' line of thinking was obviously flawed, but the man who had landed the drop kick on the suit of armor made a more compelling argument.

"And if nothing else, we can trust the viscount."

"...What?"

"Well, y'know. The viscount let Doctor live under the castle because he trusted him. You think he's gonna turn a blind eye to someone who might hurt the people here, even if he's family? And even if Doc was lying, you think the viscount wouldn't have seen through him?"

Val's indecision was challenged more strongly than ever before. Up until that point, he had been so concerned with Doctor's change of character that he had been completely blind to those around him. His thoughts, which had distrusted Doctor for a moment, returned to neutrality.

But just as Val resolved to address Doctor once more, the vampire who had attacked the armored man bent his body forward without warning. He was immediately launched deep into the woods.

"Gah...?!"

It was like watching a car accident. The man did not even have time to scream.

He was thrown against a tree trunk, several of his bones and perhaps his spine having been broken by the impact. He was unconscious before he slid down to the ground.

The armored man's movements were exceedingly simple.

All he did to the unfortunate freeloader was give his shoulder a powerful punch.

That was enough to rob the vampire of consciousness.

"If you're going to side with Theo, die."

The bloodlust radiating from the man grew dense as it permeated the air, sending a chill running down the vampires' spines.

"Wh-whoa...?"

"This ain't good. Anyone got a contingency plan for if the armor guy turns out to be stronger than Doctor?"

The hostility he had shown Doctor was now being directed at the rest of the vampires. The armored man was determined to show his thoughts through action alone.

He would begin with those that looked the weakest.

His unfortunate first target was a green-haired boy with middling vampiric presence.

"Wh-what? Uh... wait! Why us?!"

Val and Selim had yet to openly make a decision. So why was the man turning his sights on them? Caught unaware in the flood of bloodlust, Val opened his eyes wide in shock.

"Ah—"

And once he caught sight of the figure approaching from behind the suit of armor, his already-wide eyes turned to dinner plates.

There was an impact.

A sound that easily dwarfed that of the drop kick from earlier echoed across the mountain path.

"Damn it. You have any idea how hard it was to pick up your scent after you jumped into the sea like that?"

The newcomer was a werewolf with a dyed blue mane, his fangs and nails seemingly made of iron.

Unlike vampires, werewolves could not be sensed by Eaters. This particular werewolf had moved with the sound of the wind, sneaking up behind the armored man and kicking him in the head.

The suit of armor was thrown against a tree trunk. At the same time, multiple silhouettes appeared from the shadows of the woods.

Three young werewolves, standing in a formation around the suit of armor.

And a girl Val and the others knew very well.

She was wearing her usual black dress, but for some reason, it was torn and ragged. She had clearly gone through something terrible earlier that day.

For a moment, Val's mind did not register the fact that he knew her. So different was the air around her that he was more surprised by this transformation than he had been by Doctor's sudden change in character.

Her face, her eyes, and the length of her hair were all unchanged.

But the voice that came from her lips was unfamiliar and icy.

"...I care not if you choose to take your own life or flee this island."

Slowly, she stepped forward. Val flinched at her every step, heavy like the sound of a gavel pounding for a death penalty.

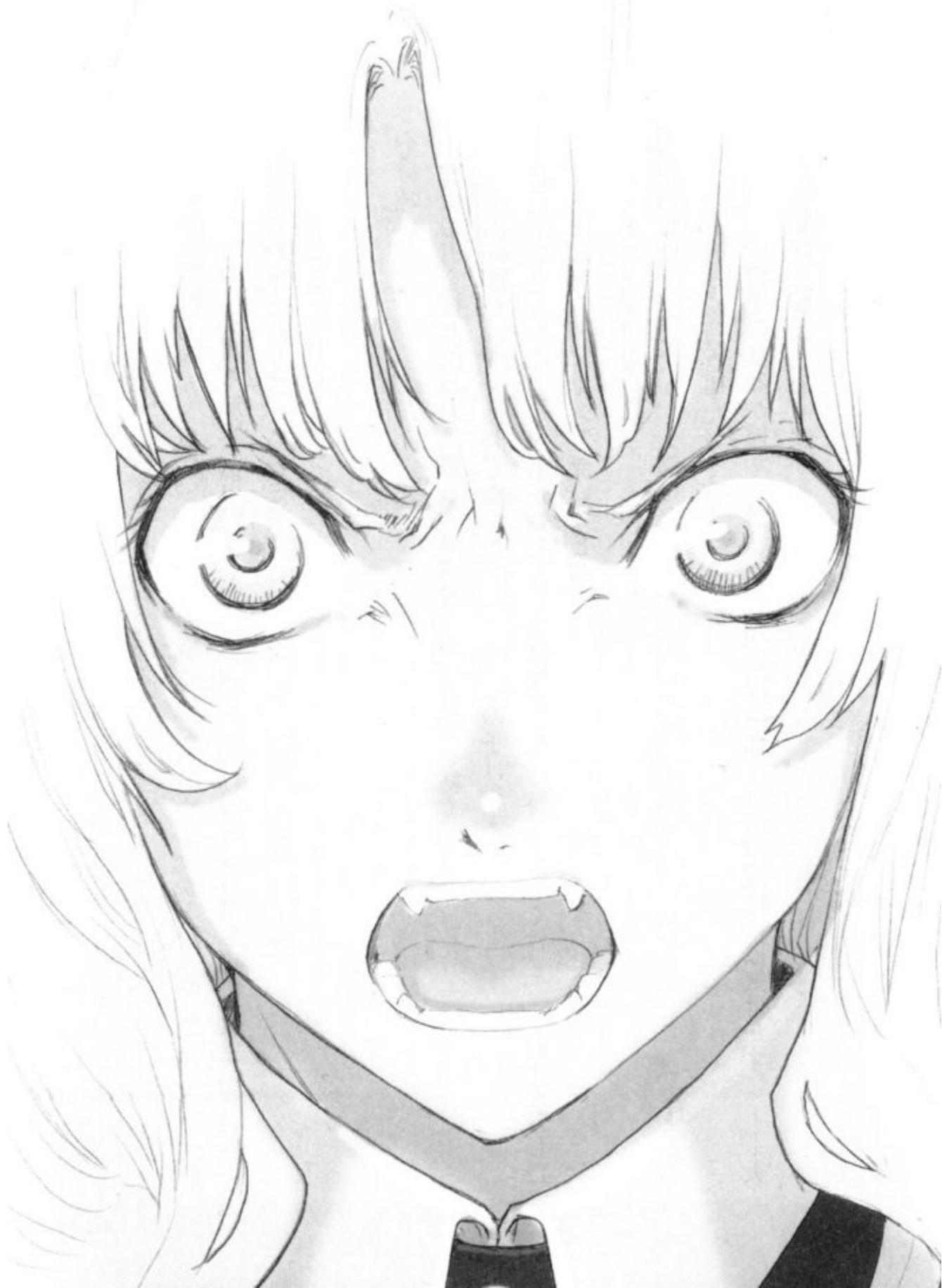
As the watermelon vampire trembled without knowing why, the girl in black continued plainly—Ferret von Waldstein bared her silent bloodlust against the armored man.

"But either way, disappear from my sight at once!"

A command to depart.

In some ways, it was more powerful an utterance than a threat to kill. It was as though Ferret were an exorcist bent on erasing a demon from her presence.

Showered with words that could be taken as either a show of great pity or hatred, the armored man got to his feet without a hint of worry about the werewolves around him. He turned to Ferret.



"Perfect timing." He said.

Rudi then turned to Doctor and continued mechanically:

"...I don't care whether she's a friend of yours or not. I'm going to kill her."

"Hah! Why would you do that? I'm the one you want to kill. You know, that girl has nothing to do with me. I won't shed a tear if you kill her."

"I know. But I'll kill her anyway."

Their respective responses did not match one another. But the armored man had already long abandoned any intention of holding a meaningful conversation, using language only to declare his goals. Doctor's smile faltered for a moment, but the young man in the suit of armor did not notice; he instead repeated himself over and over again. Not to Ferret, but to someone else deep within.

"You and that girl. You're exactly the same. You get close to humans and fool them with words of kindness, only to betray them in the end. She's going to do what you did to me. She'll murder humans left and right without a care for their lives."

"What are you—"

"If!"

Cutting the flow of their meaningless conversation was Ferret's powerful declaration.

The vampires around them gulped as she displayed her power through words alone.

"If I should deceive humans, and if I should take the lives of tens of thousands..."

The force contained in her every word filled the air. Ferret's strength of will was almost palpable.

"Even if I should one day betray Michael, and even if I should one day drink his blood and make him one of us..."

"Ferret...?" The jester gasped, startled by Ferret's unusual attitude. But her voice did not reach Ferret's ears. Ferret's words grew ever more forceful.

"No matter what Doctor might have done to you in the past, and even if he should be hounded by thousands of people bent on avenging themselves..."

Though Ferret had not been on the scene since the beginning, she must have reasoned out the story behind Doctor and the armored man through snippets of conversation she heard and the man's assault upon her and Michael. Both Doctor and Rudi froze.

"And no matter what it may be that drives you to find self-satisfaction..."

The young man in the armor could feel cold sweat running down his back.

Unfolding before him was a scene he could not accept. The girl he had so easily defeated earlier that day was now cornering him. The fact ate away at his mind, little by little.

The girl finally stopped in place. And there, she uttered emphatically:

"Nothing will excuse what you have done to Michael. I... will never forget."

She did not say that she could not forgive him.

But before the other vampires could even turn this matter over in their heads, they were distracted by something else Ferret had said.

All she did was mention Michael's name. The boy himself was nowhere in sight.

The facts came together like puzzle pieces. A profound sense of loss swelled up amongst the vampires.

"F-Ferret... did this guy... do something to Michael...?"

Val was the first to speak. His illusionary eyes displayed shock more clearly than any real pair of eyes could, and he had recreated even the sensation of cold sweat on his back.

The jester was next, questioning Ferret to try and bring some semblance of calm back to her rattled thoughts.

"Ferret? Wh-where's Michael...? You were always together, so I thought you'd be at the festival with him... What happened, Ferret? What happened? Ferret?! Where's Michael?!"

To the jester, Michael was a friend. And to Val, he was the one who had helped him find freedom on this island. Michael had always treated Val in the same way, no matter his appearance or character.

If the island were full of people like Michael, Val never would have found the need to go see Doctor. He would have been able to enjoy life properly, full of self-esteem.

Michael was his friend, and when Val was in the form of a woman—

Val and the jester stood there in shock. Ferret remained silent.

But the blue-haired werewolf spitefully listed what had happened to Michael.

"Internal bleeding. Compound fractures to his right arm. Contusions all over his body, and fractures to his spine. The laceration on his shoulder where he was shot with the stake was so bad that he was going into shock from blood loss by the time we carried him to the hospital."

The mechanical recitation of Michael's wounds reached Val's ears. His thoughts came to a standstill. Though the werewolf's tone could not have been more emotionless, he was clearly glaring daggers at the suit of armor before him.

'Please. Let all this just be a lie.'

Unable to accept the reality presented to them, Val and the others turned to Ferret with one last glimmer of hope in their eyes.

But Ferret did not say a word, merely hanging her head ever-so-slightly.

And as though driving the final nail into the coffin, an emotionless voice echoed from inside the suit of armor.

"Oh. So I didn't end up killing him after all."

It was as though a switch had been flipped in both Val and the jester.

The armored man's words, though rather short an utterance, was enough to tell them everything that mattered: He had done something to Michael that should not have been done. Something they could not allow to pass unpunished.

Doctor's past sins did not matter to them. No matter what atrocities he had committed—even if he were still an unrepentant monster—and even if the armored man did indeed have the right to take revenge on Doctor—

He was an enemy.

The armored man was an enemy.

The instant the realization hit her, the jester's form faded from sight. She had turned to fog and dissipated so quickly that it was almost as though she had teleported out of view.

The armored man flinched at her sudden movement. He quickly remembered what Doctor had said earlier—"...just wait 'til you see the castle's jester work her magic".

And if her disappearance now was actually her turning to fog—

Understanding what this meant, the man in the armor quickly leapt backwards. He could not otherwise pick out the jester's presence while surrounded by so many vampires.

Glaring at the armored man, who had put some distance between himself and the vampires and taken a fighting stance, Val apologized to Selim.

"I'm sorry, Selim."

"Yes...?"

"I'm... going to have to move away from you for a bit."

He had barely finished his sentence by the time he untangled his arm from Selim and leapt toward the armored man.

He changed form from that of a young boy to an image that personified the state of his emotions.

For a single moment, the young man in the armor wondered if he was hallucinating.

Lunging toward him was the disembodied maw of a great carnivorous dinosaur, the likes of which he had seen only in movies.

The gaping jaws opened fully, and from within emerged hundreds of tentacles. Smaller dinosaurs emerged from each tip, opening their jaws and exposing their glinting fangs.

A monster made of fangs and tentacles was rushing directly toward him.

Distracted by the sight unfolding before his eyes, the Eater did not realize that this presence belonged to the green-haired boy he had targeted not too long ago. He raised his right arm, sword and all, without even thinking. But Val's illusion regenerated itself even after being cut down. His teeth reached out to tear off the armor's hand.

The armored man's reflexes were quick enough to help him evade the attack and leap forward diagonally to avoid the monster's charge.

But it was as though the girl in black had been waiting for this moment.

She was standing before him, blocking his way.

"Just as you said, I am indeed a mere girl who has no experience in battle."

In her right hand was a white stake—likely one he had used earlier that day against her.

The young man in the armor quickly made sure that he still had more stakes in reserve, and sent them into his helm to prepare to fire.

It would be a simple task indeed to shoot her down.

But once more, he found himself interrupted.

The jester's presence, thinned to the utmost limit by her fog state, rapidly grew dense right before his eyes. A shroud of colorful fog covered his line of sight and blocked his path.

"But you had no idea that Michael possesses a power greater than yours. The many creatures on this island who call him a friend!"

By the time the fog dissipated once more, Ferret's right arm was driving the stake into the man's helm. The stake he was about to fire was pushed back into the barrel, destroying the mechanism from the inside.

"Now, reveal your face. And then... disappear from my sight for all eternity!"

She angrily thrust the stake into the helm once more.

The helm began to creak, before helplessly rolling off the great body underneath.

But compared to the value of what was about to shatter,

That tiny act of destruction was trivial indeed.

Six hundred meters over Neuberg.

The flock of bats flying through the air—Relic von Waldstein—caught sight of a strange phenomenon.

Though the rest of the island was eerily deserted, the courtyard of Waldstein Castle was filled with a mass of attendees easily double that of the previous year's number.

That alone, however, would not have troubled him.

But once the phenomenon became visible even from the skies, Relic cautiously descended in order to get to the truth behind the occurrence.

The throng of people he saw from overhead began to squirm as though they collectively made up the body of a single organism. They began to move in one direction, as though led by one objective.

The bats descended toward the gathering point without a sound.

†

On the mountain path.

Ferret and the others waited. The suit of armor remained silent.

"...What is the meaning of this? I will not take silence for an answer." Ferret said, cold fury running through her voice. The werewolves around her exchanged glances.

Their purpose was not to kill the armored man. It was to prevent Ferret from making an attempt on the man's life. That was why they had been hoping he would surrender quickly.

"...?"

But the werewolves, their senses intently focused on the man's movements, realized something. Their noses began twitching.

"What...? Ferret. His scent—"

It had disappeared from within the suit of armor.

But before the werewolf could finish his sentence, the wind changed direction ever-so-slightly. The werewolves froze.

The scent of the armor's wearer was now coming from a point that had until just now been downwind.

"...!"

The werewolves turned to the source of the scent. Val, Ferret, and Doctor followed suit.

There they spotted a lone figure.

"...Huh...?"

'Who is that?'

That was the question on the minds of most who glimpsed the figure. He was slender, and had a still-somewhat childlike face. He was not very tall, perhaps reaching up to the armor's chest-level at most. His mostly white gothic outfit made him look very much like a local resident out to enjoy the festival.

But the werewolves, who were tracking him by his scent, and Doctor, who knew his face, had already realized the truth. The young man was the wearer of that seemingly indomitable suit of armor.

"Bastard... I didn't even see him slip out of his armor!"

The werewolves looked on in shock. The young man's eyes were practically burning with outrage, his gaze unquestionably directed at Doctor.

"Rudi..."

Doctor called his name with his emotions concealed, recognizing the boy from the past in the young man's features. At that point, Rudi's gaze fell to his own two hands. He lightly clenched his fists.

Less than a second later, a powerful noise echoed across the mountainside.

At the same time, the thick tree trunk that had been next to Rudi disappeared. The firm trunk had been carved out, leaving behind fist-sized gashes. Then there was a sudden cry of pain as one of the werewolves doubled over on the ground, holding his arm.

"...?! What happened?!"

The other werewolves turned to their friend. His arm was bent at an unnatural angle, and in front of him was the large chunk of wood that had left him in such a state.

"That bastard... Did he tear out and throw the tree trunk?!"

Many Eaters and werewolves possessed enough strength to break tree trunks barehanded. But to carve out a tree trunk was a different story altogether. It was a feat requiring incredible speed and power.

What bewildered the werewolves most, however, was the fact that they had been focusing on Rudi's movements from the beginning. In spite of this, none of them had been able to catch the sight of him taking action.

"Urgh! Shit... wh-what happened to me?!" The injured werewolf cried, clutching his broken arm. The other 'monsters' gathered around him could not give an answer.

A tense silence filled the area. The lively chatter coming from the castle bounced off the foliage, creating an eerie chorus of noise.

'Yeah. Yes. I... I can do it. I still have this power.'

Looking down at his clenched fists, Rudi brought back to mind the fact of his own power. And remembering that there was one thing he needed to confirm, he turned his sights to Doctor.

"...I'm amazed. So you were holding back all this time."

Doctor had withdrawn his expression of surprise. He taunted Rudi with a malicious grin.

"Then I guess I'll have to get serious, huh." Doctor said, as though he had been hiding something up his sleeve. But the air around Rudi was different from the air around the suit of armor. He was wearing a terrifying, icy smile.

"Yeah. Let's see. I want to know just how strong you really are."

Rudi's form vanished from the mountain path.

To be precise, he had merely leapt into the air from where he stood. But his dizzying speed deceived the eyes of all who watched.

Doctor, however, kept his eyes solidly trained upon his old friend. Rudi was indeed quick, but Doctor knew he could keep up with that level of speed.

The moment that thought went through his head, Rudi was already passing by him.

"...?!"

Taken by surprise at Rudi's feint, Doctor looked up at the vampire in Rudi's sights.

By then, the scene was already unfolding before his eyes.

The alraune who had up until that point been nothing but an observer was being hoisted into the air, Rudi's grip around her creaking neck.

"Agh... Ugh..."

"Selim?!"

Doctor, the jester, and Val in his monstrous form froze. Rudi, however, did not avert his gaze from Doctor. And as though having waited for the moment Doctor finally understood what was happening before him, he stepped back with his free hand spread open. He held his flesh-and-nails hand at Selim's face as though he would a knife.

It was clear from his show of strength with the tree trunk that his hand was, in fact, more destructive than a bladed weapon.

Without hesitation, he thrust that weapon into her face. The face of a girl he had never even spoken to.

There was a sickening noise. A gush of blood disappeared into the dark of night.

But that blood did not belong to the alraune.

"Heh... Heh... Ahahahahahahahaha!"

Just as Ferret and the others realized what was happening, Rudi's laughter assaulted their ears.

The subject of his entertainment was Doctor, who had reached out his arm into the way of the attack. In exchange for diverting the blow, he had lost his hand.

Rudi let go of Selim with a mocking chuckle and leapt back. With his face twisted into a euphoric smile, he turned toward Doctor.

"Who knew you'd be the type to protect your friends? Is it because you're both vampires? But either way, Theo, you have no idea how happy I am! Now... now I can finally bring you despair!"

Doctor's severed right hand turned to fog and instantly returned to his body, fully intact. But that resilience mattered nothing to Rudi at this point. His entire body trembled as he spread his arms wide and looked up at the skies.

"Theo. Theo! Hah! You have no idea. You have no idea how happy I am. I'm finally going to get my revenge. I'll take away everything you hold dear. I'll crush it all and make them beg for mercy. Then the past will finally come full circle. Yeah. Yeah... I'm going to become what you were, back on that day you took everything from me!"

As Rudi laughed like a madman, something tugged at his thoughts.

'What did I just say?'

The same thought had occurred to him earlier that day, but at the time he had desperately rejected the notion. He had been ashamed of what he did to the boy named Michael and his vampire companion. He had wept on the seaside, horrified and disgusted at himself.

'But this time... why am I accepting the idea of becoming Theo? No, that's not the right question. Why did I reject that idea before? Why was I crying earlier?'

Then, Rudi realized the truth. He had been intoxicated.

He was drunk on his own power, finally allowed to break free of the restraints of the suit of armor. He was drunk on the joyful prospective of finally making a break from his past. And most of all, he was drunk on the objective truth of the fact that he was no longer the victim, but the devastator.

He knew he was toying with a terrible and dangerous thought. But he did not reject it.

After all, he was no longer scared of Theo.

Nothing could scare him now.

"Rudi..."

No sooner had Doctor called his name in an anguished voice than was his tiny form thrown backwards, past Selim and into a tree trunk.

"Ugh..."

Rudi had appeared before he even realized what was happening, thrusting a hand at Doctor's jaw and sending him flying into a tree.

'I couldn't even see him move.'

Rudi's movements when he was approaching Selim earlier had been slow enough for Doctor's eyes to follow. But this time, his mind did not even have the time to register the fact of Rudi's movement. The swipe at Selim earlier must have been a deliberately slowed show of strength on Rudi's part, intended to provoke a reaction out of him.

The moment Doctor completed that analysis, Rudi's hand sliced apart his body diagonally from the shoulder to the waist.

"...!"

Having once more regained some semblance of calm, Rudi spat with an icy look,

"You just stand there and watch."

Before he even completed his sentence, Rudi tore at Doctor's body with his bare hands. His arms flew like a pair of whips, eating away at bits of flesh from Doctor's body.

One cut after another after another after another.

A mechanical series of attacks drove into Doctor's body with unmatched cruelty.

Flesh was ripped from Doctor's childlike body as though he were being shot from the side. Each hit left him reeling in excruciating agony.

If Rudi were to use the silver blades equipped on the suit of armor, he could likely cause Theo even more damage. But in spite of this knowledge, he chose to feel the sensation of destroying his enemy's body with his own two hands.

The force of the slashes was such that Theo was pinned to the tree trunk, unable to even fall forward.

"You just watch. I'll make you hear their screams of pain. The sound of them begging for their lives and cursing the fact that you were ever born! After all, if you never existed, none of your friends here would have had to die!"

So suddenly did the brutal scene begin that for a moment, the vampires and werewolves of Waldstein Castle could not bring themselves to move. But as they finally returned to their senses, they charged at their enemy one after another.

Rudi did not even have to turn around to sense the presence that bore down upon him from his blind spot.

'This presence... it's that girl from before. Perfect. I'll start by lopping off her head.'

The hands that had been gouging out Doctor's body stopped for an instant. Rudi's attention was being turned to Ferret, who was approaching him from behind.

In the midst of the pain that assaulted his senses, Doctor realized what Rudi was planning to do, and finally raised his voice.

"...! STOP!"

The look of anguish on Doctor's face filled Rudi with elation.

'Yeah. That's perfect. That's the face I wanted to see.'

What he had been searching for all this time was finally right before his eyes. A pitiful scream filled with fear and sorrow.

But Rudi's movement did not slow.

'After sorrow... comes despair.'

He turned around, putting himself in the perfect position to cut off the girl's head.

But as he reached out with his hand, he was struck by an overwhelming wave of agony.

'...?!"

Rudi froze as though struck by sudden paralysis. Spurred by the momentum of his attempted attack, he spun where he stood and fell to the ground.

"What...?"

Even Ferret was taken by surprise at the turn of events. She found herself stopping where she stood and looked down at the fallen Eater.

The young man was twitching violently as though being electrocuted. His eyes rolled back as he gasped for breath with an agonized expression.

"Rudi...?" Doctor called nervously.

Rudi's only response was a hateful glare, communicated with difficulty through his bulging eyes.

'Shut up! Don't say my name! I don't need your pity!'

Rudi felt as though he was being torn apart from the inside. Pain ran through his body in waves both dull and sharp. But he desperately clung to consciousness, using his hatred of Theo as an anchor to the waking world.

'Shit... Damn it! Why now...?! Why so soon?!"

The vampires could do little but look around at one another in confusion. But the werewolves stepped in front of Ferret and surrounded Rudi as he lay twitching on the ground.

"Dunno 'bout all the details, but let's just chop off his head."

"Do not kill him. But it's probably a good idea to break his arms and legs, just in case."

As the werewolves began to discuss their plans for the Eater, Doctor spoke up without thinking.

"H-hey... Hold on."

"Finally talking like a kid, Doc. What, get tired of acting like an old fogey?"

Though the werewolves had only now realized the change in Doctor's attitude, they did not even wait for him to reply as they continued talking amongst themselves.

"...We get there's some bad blood between this bastard and Doctor, but he tried to kill Selim, and he hurt Michael and Ferret."

"Wh-what about me?" The injured werewolf said from a slight distance, but the blue-haired werewolf ignored him and turned to Ferret.

"...What are your orders?"

"My decision remains unchanged. I will be satisfied so long as this man leaves the island and never enters my sight again."

In spite of her composure, Ferret was fighting her own anger. She had tried to suppress her bloodlust alone, but nothing she did could hold it back. But each time she came close to the breaking point, she remembered Michael's face. His image neutralized the hostility that threatened to boil over into violence.

'...Honestly...'

Understanding that Michael was a part of her heart even now, Ferret sighed in defeat.

"Say... why'd he fall over all of a sudden?"

"Maybe it was his lunch."

"I'm more curious about who this guy is."

"Seriously. We dodged a bullet there."

"We were lucky." "Luck is a skill, too." "Really? So this is all because we're actually seriously skilled?" "We're pretty amazing, huh?" "Heh heh heh... To grasp victory without lifting a finger... That is the way of the shin kage-ryu vampires." "The hell's that supposed to be?" "Ugh, ouch... Guys! What happened while I was out cold?"

The freeloader vampires, finally released from the tension in the air, returned to their usual chatter.

"Anyway, about that safe of yours, Doc..." One of the vampires said.

But he was cut off by a shadow passing by before his eyes.

"?"

By the time he began to wonder what it could have been, a second shadow, and a third passed before him.

"Are these... bats? Did somebody transform?"

Were they merely wild bats, the vampires wondered, but the flock steadily grew in number and began to circle around Rudi as though in an attempt to distract the werewolves.

"What is this?!"

The werewolves took a step away from the Eater, leaving a gap where they had been standing. The flock of bats converged there, creating a single figure.

"...Who are you?" Ferret asked.

The figure finally took on colors and the fabric of clothing materialized as he regained his form. The man bowed courteously.

"I apologize for the sudden nature of this visit. My name is Melhilm Herzog. I am an old friend of your father's, as well as the former overseer of your birth parents."

"Pardon?"

It took Ferret some time to process the meaning of the second part of Melhilm's introduction. But as soon as the realization hit her, blood drained from her face.

"Of course, it seems that some of those gathered here have no need for introductions."

"Mr. Melhilm..."

Val's illusionary body broke out into cold sweat and turned his gaze to his creator. The jester was wearing a clearly uncomfortable look. The freeloader vampires were huddled behind the werewolves. But without sparing them a glance, Melhilm mechanically reached over to Rudi and pulled him to his feet.

"Rudi. How many times must I remind you to never unleash your full strength when fighting alone?"

Rudi's moans of pain were silenced as Melhilm put a hand over his mouth before giving him an injection in the back of the neck.

"The pain will subside soon enough. Take deep breaths. My word... I don't recall giving you permission to remove your armor." Melhilm mumbled. But he quickly spotted Rudi's helm rolling around the mountainside.

"Ah, so it was forcibly taken off of you. Then I suppose you had no other choice."

Melhilm looked around once more, and turned his gaze to a point further up the path.

"...You are late, Zygmunt."

It sounded as though he was speaking to himself. The werewolves quickly turned their attention to their surroundings, expecting Melhilm's allies to arrive. That was when they realized what was happening around them.

The lively chatter that had been echoing from the castle was all but silenced. They could still hear music and singing from the direction of the festivities, but the presence of people had been sucked out of the ambience.

A moment later, a great wave appeared at the top of the mountain path.

The wave approached like a tsunami, bent on destruction as it slowly descended the slope.

Ferret stared into the darkness. The identity of the great mass soon dawned on her.

It was a mass of humans, thousands—perhaps tens of thousands—strong, making their way down the mountain in utter silence.

"What...?!" Ferret gasped.

"Allow me to make things clear. This is the ability of my friend Zygmunt Kiparis. It is no different from the subjugation imposed by ordinary vampires. Of course, Zygmunt is capable of using airborne infection to subjugate up to a hundred thousand humans at once..." Melhilm trailed off. But his brief explanation was enough for Ferret to understand in horror what exactly was happening to the people of the island.

Normally, she would have scoffed at the idea of a vampire subjugating humans through airborne infection. But the sight of the crowds in the distance were proof enough that Melhilm's claim was a genuine one.

"Zygmunt is in the process of gathering eighty percent of the island's human population at this point. Those occupied in essential facilities like power plants, of course, have been left untouched to make the task of covering our tracks easier."

The image of a certain boy flashed through Ferret's thoughts.

'Then what of Michael?'

Fraught with worry for the human boy she had left in the hospital, Ferret quickly began to lose her composure. She walked up to Melhilm, grabbed him by the collar, and demanded,

"...For what goal are you doing all this?"

"'Goal'? I'm afraid you'll have to give me a clearer definition. You refer to the goal of the Organization? Or the goals held by me, the individual? Caldimir's goal, of course, is the petty act of bringing trouble upon Gerhardt."

Ferret tensed as the man continued at length with names she did not recognize. The subjugated humans were still descending the mountainside. And just as the freeloader vampires attempted to escape toward the base of the slope, they discovered yet another wave of humans approaching from below.

"This ain't good."

"I guess we could transform into bats and run. But then what?"

"Ferret and Selim can't transform, you know."

Whether or not the vampires tried to hide their growing worry, the humans continued to draw near. They said absolutely nothing as they advanced, but their silence only deepened Ferret's fear.

They came down like sand in an hourglass, or perhaps an avalanche in slow motion. Like a languid school of sharks slowly cutting through the darkness. People, people, people. A mass of people gathered around them with no gap in sight.

The silent wave was now a mere hundred meters away. Ferret let go of Melhilm's collar and carefully chose words of negotiation.

"What is it that you people want from us? Why would you stoop so low as to involve all these innocent humans?!"

The image of Michael lying in his hospital bed flashed through her thoughts. It then shifted into the image of Michael being subjugated by some unfamiliar vampire, turned into a hostage—or worse, made to swing his fists at her—the fists with which he had defended her earlier that very day. A chill ran down her spine and a scream escaped her lips.

Melhilm snorted in response, his expression ever unchanging.

"To answer your question, one of the purposes of my visit today is to reclaim something that rightfully belongs to me. The other—though it has no direct connection to you—is... Hm?"

Before Melhilm could go on, the mountainside was swept up in the very same scene as before.

A single bat passed by Melhilm's eyes. A strange cacophony of noise descended rapidly from overhead.

A moment later, his line of sight was completely obscured by a thick shadow. The streetlights illuminated nothing in the pitch-black darkness of the mountainside, the only clarity being the powerful wingbeats filling Melhilm's ears.

The identity of the blackness was clear. It was a massive flock of bats concentrated in one area—the same tactic Melhilm favored.

'These bats... they outnumber even mine!'

Even the subjugated humans stopped where they stood.

But in the sight filled with humans and bats, Melhilm caught sight of a strange object out of the corner of his eyes.

There was a great hole in the ground, lined with the fangs of a wolf.

"What... in the world...?"

He struggled to get a closer look, but the bats were too much; the maw disappeared from view.

"Damn it!"

By the time he was finally freed from the living smokescreen, the hole in the ground had already vanished. The bats dove into the earth as though having waited for that very moment, melting into the very ground.

The darkness passed, and the path was once more illuminated by the street lamps.

"...?!"

But all Melhilm saw were the trees trembling in the wind, the waves of humans approaching him, and Rudi, who was just beginning to overcome his gasps of pain. Ferret, Valdred, the jester, the werewolves, and the other vampires had vanished without a trace, as though having melted into the flock of bats.

'What is happening here?'

"What's going on here, sir?" A woman asked from behind him, echoing his own thoughts. Melhilm did not need to turn to identify the owner of the voice. It was Theresia, who had followed after him through the throngs of people.

"You are late, Theresia." Melhilm spat.

But Theresia ignored him and went straight for Rudi, anxiously cradling her childhood friend in her arms.

"Rudi! What's happened to you?! How could you go off on your own like that...?! You know what happens when you fight at full strength without your armor!"

Perhaps her voice had snapped him back into consciousness; Rudi slowly opened his eyes, taking deep breaths.

"Theo... Where's Theo...? I don't care what happens to me. I don't care... But... but I have to make him suffer... I have to make him know despair..." He gasped.

Even under the dim lights it was clear to Theresia that Rudi was in ill health. The veins crisscrossing his body were fully visible under his skin. The whites of his eyes were clouded yellow, and there were purplish cracks all over his body—wounds that did not bleed, likely because his circulatory system had ceased to function.

It was a sight for panic, if nothing else, but Melhilm stoically observed the scene. From the way Rudi and Theresia were reacting to the former's physical state, they clearly knew the cause of his condition.

"Rudi... please. Please don't do anything stupid. If you died alone before me... if you died killing Theo, I... I wouldn't have any reason to live on." Theresia whispered, holding Rudi in her arms, "Please don't forget, Rudi. Ever since that day... we've been on the same boat."

"That is quite enough of losing yourself to your emotions, Theresia. Now, seek out the presence of vampires other than myself in this area." Melhilm commanded plainly.

Theresia nodded. Rudi shakily got to his feet with her support, having finally recovered from his pain.

"Yes, sir. An immense presence was spread over this area just earlier, but that presence has now taken a singular form and is moving alongside many other vampires."

"I see. In which direction?"

When Theresia gave her answer, Melhilm's eyes grew nostalgic.

"They... they seem to be moving underground."

†

'What is this place?'

Ferret looked around in the darkness.

It was pitch black, but she could hear the others' voices around her.

"Wh-where are we?" "What's going on?" "All those bats came out of nowhere..." "Then there was a hole in the ground, huh?" "Hey, this feels kinda familiar." "I think we fell into a hole. Definitely." "You all right, Ferret?" "Hey, where's Selim?!" "I'm over here! Please don't worry about me." "Eek! It's so dark! Places like this are no fun without Master Watt!" "Hey, keep your mind out of the gutter! You're making me start imagining stuff!" "Shut up!"

With a mumbled, "I am all right", Ferret once more tried to understand what had just happened to them.

Although they were surrounded by darkness, from the echo of everyone's voices, they were probably in a rather open area. The walls seemed to be made of dirt, but there was one thing she knew for certain:

'This space is moving.'

The moment she came to a conclusion, a very familiar voice piped up in the darkness.

"Sorry, everyone. I didn't really understand what was happening, so I just pulled in everyone I recognized."

"Honored Brother?!"

As soon as Ferret and the others realized that the sheepish voice belonged to Relic, they breathed a sigh of relief.

'Then this place must be...'

"Oh, right! We're underground right now. I turned part of the ground to fog and made us a little space in the dirt." Relic said. Ferret laughed, astonished.

When a vampire transformed into fog or a flock of bats, those with greater power could also transform the clothes they wore and small objects around themselves. It was essentially the act of labeling inanimate objects as part of one's own body, altering its composition through the power of the soul. Relic was born with an immense capacity for this ability, known as 'synchronization'. At one point, he had synchronized with the entire island of Growerth and nearly transformed the island itself into fog and bats.

"I'm getting better and better at controlling my abilities now. I didn't think I'd end up getting to use it so much, though."

He was now controlling rocks and earth as he pleased, moving his friends as though operating an elevator. It was an unbelievable act by most standards, but none gathered there doubted the veracity of his powers.

Soon, a ray of light pierced the darkness. Ferret's line of sight quickly widened. And a moment later, the vampires and werewolves emerged into a humid space and fell onto a hard surface one after another.

"Whoa! I'm sorry. I must've gotten my calculations mixed up. We shouldn't have come out this high up..."

"Damn it, Relic! I was just starting to think you were pretty awesome, y'know?" One of the freeloaders cried, rubbing his aching head and looking around.

There was a sturdy stone wall lined with silver suits of armor.

"Oh. This is..." Val started,

"The storage area in the castle basement." Selim said. The others soon grasped their current location.

"The humans might find us here, so let's head to the caverns for now." Relic said. He had barely finished his sentence by the time he recited an incantation at the large suit of armor that guarded the door.

"...I wanted to hear your side of the story on the way, but there's something I need to ask you first." Relic said to everyone, his reassuringly cheerful voice quickly giving way to worry.

"Has anyone here seen Hilda?"

†

The mayor was left alone.

The human audience that had been screaming in excitement at the two singers on the stage had gone silent in an instant, departing from the courtyard like children led away by the piper.

Even the VIPs took to their feet one after another. They leapt off the balcony where they were seated and disappeared into the crowds, hobbling along with their ankles twisted.

The singers seemed to be shocked at the sudden development, but they showed no signs of stopping their performance. In fact, their singing grew even more passionate as they poured out all they had into bringing back the departing crowds.

'So those two're vampires too. That's some professionalism they've got. Maybe I'll actually take care to remember their names.'

Listening to the singers' exceptional voices, the mayor followed the VIPs off the balcony. He cracked his neck loudly and turned his gaze to the mass exodus.

The wave of humans looked almost like a giant amoeba threatening to swallow the entire castle.

The crowd was moving.

Anything the crowd so much as grazed could be affected with ease, in many senses of the word. It was a great mass of energy, one that could cut down everything in its path if the will to destroy were to be imposed upon it.

'So you've finally made your move.'

But Watt had no way of knowing where the people were headed.

'Boring as shit.'

For now, Watt was capable of nothing. All he could do was run simulations in his head of the many different scenarios that could result from the situation and try to figure out just how much work he would have to put into the inevitable cover-up job.

"Excuse me, Mayor."

Someone was talking to him.

If someone still possessed free will that allowed them to speak, the speaker was clearly a vampire.

Watt then realized that the vampire was both a complete stranger and a familiar face.

"It's nice to meet you, sir. My name is Loa."

It was the girl whom he had encountered earlier at the viscount's parlor. He had spotted her several times in the crowds.

Wondering about her nationality from the sound of her name, Watt tried to figure out why she would approach him.

But before he could say a word, Loa revealed her intentions to him without hesitation.

"Sir, how would you like to make a deal with me?"

†

Underground, Waldstein Castle. The laboratory.

<What's going on here?>

Even knowing that there was no one there to answer, Professor could not stop herself from uttering a question.

A strange scene was unfolding on the monitors she had checked to find Doctor's whereabouts.

According to the cameras, there were almost no humans in the castle courtyard—this, on the first night of the Carnale Festival.

In order to solve the mystery, Professor cycled through the monitors one by one. And eventually, she found one camera that had captured some familiar faces.

Displayed on the monitor was the entrance of the castle's storage room. It was the room that housed the entryway to the underground caverns, and the camera was installed inside the suit of armor that acted as the gatekeeper.

Many faces were being displayed on the camera, all of them familiar to Professor.

The jester. Selim. Val. Relic. Ferret. And...

<That's...>

His white lab coat had been replaced by a red one, but Professor knew from the single glimpse she had caught as his face flashed by the monitor. It was the vampire who had disappeared from the lab several hours earlier.

<DOCTOR~!>

Ecstatic at their impending reunion, Professor leapt out of the laboratory without even bothering to get dressed—of course, she was already only wearing a lab coat to begin with—but there was one thing different about her appearance this time. A single photograph had been affixed to one of her arms with a magnet.

She left the room excitedly, not knowing that this single picture would unleash tragedy.

†

Underground storage area.

"If they are indeed below the earth, they have nowhere to run but the underground caverns stretching underneath the castle." Melhilm said, looking around the storage room in the castle basement.

Once Theresia had reported that the vampires were moving underground, he had come to the storage area without a moment's hesitation. He had the subjugated masses stand in a formation around the castle, and was currently accompanied only by the two Eaters and approximately a dozen of Zygmunt's Leaves.

"The cavern entrance is hidden in a place like this, sir?"

"Hmph. I used to cavort through this place centuries ago, in my youth." Melhilm answered, and added to himself, "I was expecting the maids to get in our way. It's almost eerily silent here."

In spite of his worries, Melhilm quietly stepped over to the cavern entrance mechanism and looked at the suit of armor.

"...This is a new addition."

There were no other pathways in the area. The suit of armor was likely a locking mechanism, but Melhilm considered breaking it down by force. But just as he prepared to give his Eaters the order, the armor creaked and began to move aside as though permitting them entrance.

"What is this?"

Shocked at the sudden movement of the suit of armor—which was easily twice the size of Rudi's—they glared up at it. There they found the master of the castle.

The pool of blood was hovering in midair, as though there were nothing more natural than his presence there.

[This suit of armor was a rather recent installation. I'm afraid I would prefer to keep it intact. I shall lead the way, old friend.]

"Gerhardt." Melhilm said, looking slightly surprised. Theresia and Rudi, on the other hand, were clearly astonished at the letters of blood being woven in midair, turning to Melhilm for an explanation. The vampire sighed.

"It seems I didn't even have the time for a proper explanation. This pool of blood is Gerhardt von Waldstein, the master of Waldstein Castle and the lord who governs the island's vampires. He is also my sworn friend."

'...Another Waldstein.' Rudi frowned at the mention of the name. Normally he would have lashed out without a second thought, but he was stopped by the fact that Melhilm called this vampire a friend, and the fact that he had no idea how he would go about attacking a pool of blood. All Rudi could do was grind his teeth and glare at the viscount.

[Ah, I also happen to have some business underground at the moment. I shall guide you to the execution grounds. After all, they say that no journey is complete without a companion, do they not?]

"If I remember correctly, it's a straight path to the execution grounds... Never mind. Do as you will, Gerhardt." Melhilm said with a chuckle. Theresia was shocked by the two vampires' affable interaction.

"Sir, isn't this vampire our enemy? What if this is a trap...?"

"Hold your tongue, Theresia." Melhilm said sternly. Wearing on his face a sort of condescension different from the one he had shown Shizune, he said to the two Eaters,

"You would dare show distrust toward my friend?"

†

Underground, Waldstein Castle. The Execution Grounds.

"Then... all this is your fault, Doctor...?" Val asked solemnly. Doctor nodded without a word.

As the vampires and werewolves made their way to the execution grounds in the caverns, Doctor confessed everything about his crimes.

How he had murdered thousands upon thousands of humans in the past. How he had betrayed two children and slaughtered their loved ones for amusement.

And the fact that the children—now grown—had come to Growerth for revenge, and the way their intentions formed a large part of this incident.

"That's... that's terrible, Doctor! We all got involved in this mess because of you!" Val said indignantly. But the other vampires did not entirely share his sentiments.

"Whoa, Val. Calm down. Doc was just acting like the bad guy to keep us safe back there."

"He pretended to be our enemy so we wouldn't get attacked. Then he'd take that armor guy and leave the island... is what I think he was planning."

"Textbook stuff, if you think about it." "C'mon, let's forgive him. Look at that spirit he's showing!" "Don't be like that, Doctor. If you're really feeling sorry, just give us the key and the combination to your—"

But before the freeloaders could fully lighten the mood, Val cried out and stopped them.

"Everyone! Shut up for a second!"

It was very much unlike Val in this form to be so emotional. The vampires flinched.

"Doctor's still responsible for getting us all into this mess! Michael was hurt badly, and Selim almost got killed!"

Ferret looked away at the mention of Michael's name. She had given ear to Doctor's confession in silence, her expression locked in mystery.

Val, on the other hand, could not hold back his anger. The two people to whom he could open his heart—Michael, to whom he was deeply indebted, and Selim, in whom he was nurturing an interest—had both been endangered by Doctor's past actions.

Doctor received Val's outrage head-on, hanging his head in shame.

"I'm sorry. Everything that's happened today... it's all my fault."

"Talk is cheap, you know—"

"That's enough, Val! Please."

To Val's surprise, it was Selim who tried to soothe his anger.

"You might be okay with this, Selim, but I..."

"Then... Val, how could I help you to not be angry anymore?"

Val caught a glimpse of Selim's eyes and deflated. She was right; unleashing his rage on Doctor would solve nothing. And if nothing else, he was quite certain that Doctor had indeed been playing the villain earlier for everyone's well-being.

'Playing the villain, huh. But then again... he really used to be one.' Val thought, glancing at Doctor. The jester was speaking to him.

"So Doctor? When you called Professor a piece of scrap earlier, you didn't really mean it, did you? Did you?"

"...No. Professor is my most cherished—"

The jester cut him off before he could even finish.

"Yay! That's great! I forgive you, Doctor!"

"...Thank you, Pirie."

There was nothing about Doctor now that made him seem like a so-called mass murderer. So what had led to his change of heart? Why did the boy with the blood of thousands on his hands suddenly change?

'Maybe I can hold off the interrogation until after he tells us why.'

Val's anger slowly dissipated. He sighed and turned to Selim and Doctor.

"All right. I'm sorry for blowing up at you, Doctor. I guess the most important thing now is to focus on that armor guy and Mr. Melhilm."

Selim smiled at his apology, relieved. She turned to Doctor.

"Doctor, please. Please don't call yourself a villain. Even if you've done something truly unforgivable... please don't cut yourself down like that. No one can measure the weight of their own sins. Don't create any more sins in here, of all places..."

It was unusual for the introverted Selim to be so forthright with her opinions. Doctor, Val, Relic, and Ferret could not bring themselves to interrupt her.

Selim looked into the distance and concluded her statement quietly, as though speaking to herself.

"After all, there's nothing but punishment here in this place, built for execution."

'What does she mean?' Val wondered. What was on her mind as she lived here in the execution grounds? And how could she treat others this way—both Doctor and himself?

"Selim... How? How can you—"

How could she trust others so easily, he wanted to ask.

But his question was interrupted by a flash of silver.

"?!"

The silver point slithered toward Val, but Relic caught it before it could reach him.

Relic glared. There was a woman holding a whip standing at the door leading aboveground.

"...Who are you?"

"I'm surprised you actually caught that." Theresia said, not answering Relic's question. She smiled and pulled back her whip with a powerful tug, using as little force as possible.

"?!"

Relic was caught off guard by Theresia's surprising strength. He lost his grip on the end of the whip.

Once the whip was completely back in her control, Theresia turned her sights upon one vampire in particular. It was the vampire whom she had encountered with Rudi as children; the one who had destroyed their families and hometown. Theodosius M. Waldstein.

"It's been a long time, Theo."

"Theresia...!" Doctor cried in shock. At that very moment, several figures entered the execution grounds one by one.

"Theo..." Rudi growled. He was followed by Melhilm, who was in human form, as well as a dozen or so locals and tourists who all seemed to be under subjugation.

"...Did the Eaters follow our presence here? I thought they'd bring *all* the humans along, though..."

Although Relic knew nothing about Zygmunt, the state of the humans on the island clued him into what might be happening on Growerth.

'Maybe... just maybe...'

Remembering the face of a certain human girl, Relic began to wonder if, perhaps, she was among the crowds gathered on the mountainside.

But his hopes were cruelly dashed by a single voice.

"Relic."

Amongst the dozen or so humans gathered was one familiar figure.

It took Relic several seconds to understand that she was his beloved childhood friend.

And it took yet another thirteen seconds before he could finally accept that she was under subjugation.

"Hilda!" He cried out, but she gave him no answer. She did nothing but look at him with an empty smile. Relic turned to Melhilm and questioned him in an uncharacteristically furious tone.

"This is your doing, isn't it?! Release Hilda right this second!"

Relic had instantly reached the breaking point, so incensed that he looked just about ready to turn the entire cavern to fog and crush everything within.

But before he could do anything, a sight even more familiar than Hilda came into view.

[Calm yourself, Relic.]

"...Huh...?"

The viscount suddenly descended from the ceiling as he addressed his son.

"F-Father! What are you doing here?!"

[Ah, allow me to answer! It seems nothing unnatural to me that I am here within the bounds of my own castle. And before I forget, allow me to introduce you. This man here is my sworn friend, Melhilm Herzog. I do believe I've spoken of him in the past.]

So nonchalant and surprising was his father's interruption that Relic's anger quickly abated and gave way to confusion.

"What's going on here, Father? And what's happened to Hilda?! If you know this person, please tell him to let her go!"

[This subjugation is the work of another vampire known as Zygmunt, who unfortunately has chosen not to join us in person here.]

"...How's all this possible? And why are you with these people?"

[Ah, naturally, I am here to resolve the situation taking place on this island.]

As the viscount and Relic continued their discussion, Rudi and Theresia faced down the vampire who had started everything.

"Theo... You won't get away this time..." Rudi said grimly. But Doctor was nothing but upset by Rudi's countenance.

It was not apparent on the dimly-lit mountain path, but here it was clear as day; Rudi was clearly in excruciating agony. What had happened to him? This was no ordinary illness or injury. Did his condition have something to do with being an Eater?

As though confirming Doctor's suspicions, Melhilm placed a hand on Rudi's shoulder.

"Control yourself, Rudi. Even the shot I gave you has its limits. Do not release your powers for any longer than a single moment at a time." He said with an annoyed sigh, "this is precisely why I warned you to keep your abilities in check. Once you remove your armor and battle with reckless abandon, your Eater powers overstep the bounds of your human body."

Instead of giving a response, Rudi groaned in pain.

The viscount finally reacted to their conversation. He continued his discussion with Relic with part of his body, while using another to speak with Melhilm unnoticed.

[That is indeed a surprise, Melhilm. To think that such a weakness existed among Eaters.]

"An Eater's body is strengthened by their victims' powers only up to a certain point. Too much power will eat away at their bodies. Though most Eaters would never even sense the screams of their muscles and organs, the pain builds up little by little... until they become like this pitiful subject. Of course, we were fortunate enough to have Rudi's precedent that Theresia could be spared the same fate." He said, not caring that Rudi was also listening to the truth about himself, "and even if Rudi were to never again use the full extent of his powers... an optimistic estimate gives him a year to live, so long as no measures are taken to save him."

[...]

"...!"

The viscount and Doctor were silent. But while the former was plainly inscrutable, the latter could not hide his distress.

Rudi, however, did not react to the revelation; he would remain true to his goals, no matter the consequences.

"I don't need any help. One year is all I need. One year to make Theo suffer and despair..."

Doctor felt guilt gnawing at every part of his body. He was the one who had driven Rudi to this point.

"It's okay, Rudi. I promise—if you die, I'll corner Theo in your place." Theresia said with an icy smile. Doctor shot her a murderous glare.

It was the first time that day that Rudi had seen such an expression on his enemy's face. But something about it struck him as odd.

'Is he... angry at Theresia? But why? He never looked at me like that.'

Theresia only smiled sheepishly.

But Rudi's question lingered. Why did Theresia's reaction to seeing Theo look so different from his own? Why was there no hostility in the look she gave Theo?

"This is getting pretty heavy, don'tcha think?"

"Can we go upstairs and get some sleep now?"

As the situation grew complicated with the arrival of Melhilm, the freeloader vampires gave up on trying to follow the series of events.

But the coming of Melhilm's company was not to be the last of the interruptions in the cavern.

One final player arrived on the scene—the person who seemed to be the most out of place in the unfolding sequence of events.

Of course, the descriptor of 'person' was very difficult to justify in the case of this particular player.

<Oh! There you are, Doctor! I finally found you~!>

With an unbelievably cheerful cry, the white coffin equipped with mechanical arms and caterpillar tracks made her way into the execution grounds from the opposite direction as Melhilm.

<Oh? Wow, we have so many guests here today! I get it! You went out to invite all these guests over, didn't you, Doctor?>

Although a fight had yet to break out, Professor seemed to have taken no note of the tension in the air.

In contrast to his partner's gaiety, Doctor turned to her with a look of utter desperation and shouted,

"No! Stay away, Elsa!"

At that moment, Doctor and the two Eaters froze. The former went pale as a sheet.

'Why...? Why did I just call her that... in front of these two? No, that's not right. I probably called her that because... because Theresia is here. Damn it! I... I don't even know if she's really Elsa or not... So why...?'

<'Elsa'? Doctor... are you talking about the girl in this picture?>

Professor seemed to be chiefly concerned, not with the content of Doctor's warning, but the name he had used to refer to her.

<Then... is this girl here... who I used to be before I lost my memories?>

And in an attempt at confirmation, she raised her mechanical arm to show him the photograph.

When Rudi caught sight of the girl in the picture, everything came to a standstill.

"Big... sis... Elsa...?"

'Is that coffin... my sister? No... is she inside it? And what's this about losing her memories? Does that mean she's even forgotten that day...?'

The root of his cursed memories—the moment he abandoned his sister—came back to haunt Rudi once more. His agony intensified, several times worse than it usually was.

Then, it occurred to him:

'What was it that I wanted to do if I ever saw her again...?'

What if the coffin truly was his sister? What then? Would he rejoice at their reunion? Would he ask her how she had survived? Or...

He remembered that his sister was herself the cause of his unending nightmares. A sickening emotion began to swirl in the pit of his stomach.

Rudi knew full well that nothing could make up for his abandonment of Elsa. And what could he do, now that she was standing here before him?

'What did I want with Sis?'

The claim that she had lost her memory sunk its claws into Rudi's mind. But what if she were to recover her memories?

"I... I wish... you never existed..."

What if he were to hear those words again?

But Rudi's train of thought was derailed by his own childhood friend.

"How...?"

Theresia had been frozen in shock for some time, but she finally opened her mouth.

But her words offered Rudi no salvation—instead, they pushed him into utter confusion.

"How... can Elsa still be alive...?"

'What?'

But before Rudi could voice his question, Theresia squeezed out a trembling voice:

"I... I killed you that day! I know I did!"

†

"Unbelievable. I suppose I have no right to say this after being eaten by Shizune, but I can't help but marvel at the mental frailty of these subjects. To be swayed by a moment of weakness to utterly unnecessary truths like this..." Melhilm said with a sigh, glancing at the two Eaters, "your inability to hold your tongue will be the death of you, Rudi. Theresia. And you as well, my old failure."

The moment he heard Melhilm, Val thought that the statement was being directed at him. He flinched, remembering how Melhilm had in the past called him a failure. But for some reason, the vampire at the end of Melhilm's gaze was none other than the terrified Doctor.

[Melhilm. These sentiments you express may call for more emotion than what you show now.]

"...If I recall, I've already told you why I came to this island today, Gerhardt." Melhilm said with eyes narrowed, slowly walking over to Doctor, "I... have come to right the wrongs of my past. Shizune and Watt, and even Caldimir's plans are nothing more than bonuses. I am here today as a researcher. To cut down my past mistakes."

[It has long been a troublesome habit of yours, Melhilm, to believe that destruction can truly wipe clean all slates.]

Realizing that they were once more treading on thin ice, Val and the others tensed. Doctor looked at Melhilm with fear in his eyes, not even trying to hide his trembling hands.

"I... never imagined that you would come to Growerth in person." He squeaked.

But Melhilm ignored Doctor's comment and asked him a question:

"Do you resent me?"

"No. The only people I truly resent are myself... and Theresia."

"I see. A failure you may be, Theo, but I am glad to see that you do not despise me, your creator."

As the conversation between Melhilm and Doctor reached his ears, Rudi's already-confused mind was stirred once more.

'His creator?'

He quietly fell to his knees, not registering the meaning of the word.

'Theo... despises Theresia? What does that mean? And... what did Theresia say earlier? What did she say? Is that strange coffin... really Sis?'

'What... what is going on here...?'

He could hear something in his heart collapse. Everything he had strived for, crumbling to dust. It was as though his entire past was nothing but a dream, though he still knew nothing of the specifics.

But there was one among those present who would answer all his questions. Not to save him, however, but to demolish the things that had already begun to fall.

"Melhilm."

An unfamiliar voice echoed in the caverns. Melhilm frowned and stopped where he stood. One of the dozen or so humans who had come with Hilda was walking over to him.

"You must prioritize Comrade Caldimir's mission."

"Hm? I see. I thought you were all Leaves, but to think that there was a Branch among you here..." Melhilm said, to the confusion of many, and glanced over at the humans. The Branch continued.

"I have no quarrel with your obsession with the past, Melhilm. But do not stand in my way."

"What goal could you accomplish, now that things have come to this?"

"Comrade Caldimir has provided me in advance with seventy-eight stratagems to be applied in various situations. Allow me to cite an example. Under these particular conditions..."

The man acting as Zygmunt's Branch cracked his neck and fixed his gaze upon a certain Eater—the confused and dazed young man.

"...Under these particular conditions, I am to reveal every truth to Nidhogg—Rudi Wenders."

'The truth? What about?'

Rudi could do little but look up at Zygmunt in silence. His eyes trembled, and the world around him seemed to shake.

"Comrade Rudi. Who do you think it was that created the vampire Theodosius?"

It was a sudden question. Rudi had no answer to give.

"What is the meaning of Theodosius M. Waldstein's middle initial? Do you realize its significance?"

Zygmunt then looked at Relic, Ferret, and the viscount in turn.

"Yes. Everything began when the twins' parents left the Organization's custody and sought asylum on this island."

Confirming that he was now on the receiving end of Rudi's attention, the Branch slowly began to orate to the entire cavern.

He would reveal the truth that led to the beginning of everything, as well as one particular conclusion.

Things had begun approximately fifteen years ago.

When Gerhardt took the twins' parents under his protection, the Organization gave up on retrieving the family. But they did not so easily let the incident pass.

As retaliation against Gerhardt von Waldstein, they sought out the youngest child of Gerhardt's distant human relatives and turned him into a vampire of the Violet Sage.

After the transformation, the boy took on the name of the one who turned him as his middle name.

He would thus be known as Theodosius Melhilm Waldstein.

The experiment to create a relict continued, this time by combining the souls of multiple vampires within one entity.

"The experiment ended in failure, creating nothing but one mentally unstable vampire. Believing that the half-broken boy would be capable of nothing, Melhilm carelessly abandoned him. Is that not correct?" Zygmunt asked. Melhilm answered with silence, as good as acknowledging his part in the experiment.

Doctor listened to everything with fists and teeth clenched.

Noting this, Zygmunt gleefully continued with the story.

"But you see, Melhilm's experiments were only half a failure."

The boy who had been deemed powerless at the end of the experiments slowly grew in strength in the form of maturation. But in spite of his growing power, he had already long been cast out of the Organization.

Having been conditioned to hold absolute loyalty to the Organization, the unfortunate vampire lost even a place to go back to as a human being. And little by little, he came to know his own strength.

But he still knew of no way to contact the Organization. The boy waited and waited for the day someone would finally need him. The day when he, the vampire, would be needed by others of his own kind.

Perhaps it was because he was still an oblivious child when he gained such power, or perhaps it was because the continued overshadowing of his mind had eaten away at his heart. The boy, even in his twisted state, lived with but one thought: "I want to show my strength to the world".

Because he was a powerful vampire, he would behave like one.

'I'm a vampire. I'm a really really strong vampire.'

The boy did everything he could to live up to his image of the quintessential vampire. He desperately tried to behave like the monsters and demons he had seen in movies and storybooks.

And the moment he sucked the blood of a human for the very first time, the boy so easily crossed a fatal line. He was a murderer.

"Several years passed, and the insane child had become a monstrous mass murderer. Rudi... I am sure you could say more about his state than I could describe."

Rudi flinched at the sudden mention of his name.

He was still terribly shaken, unable to properly process his own emotions. Zygmunt's words were registering in his mind as raw data, but it was difficult to translate the implications into a reaction.

'No. Don't try to understand. Forget everything Zygmunt says,' his instincts told him, but Rudi continued to listen. The way he was, any other choice was unthinkable.

"And as for what happened afterwards... Theresia knows quite well."

Theresia said nothing, only glaring at the white coffin. She tightly clenched her whip as she glowered at Professor with a look that could kill. It was difficult to tell if she was even listening to Zygmunt in the first place.

Chuckling at her reaction, Zygmunt broke out into a grin and continued.

"Theresia was always in love with Theodosius. Even when she was a child. Even after Rudi's family and her own were murdered, her feelings for him never once wavered."

Theresia had accepted Caldimir's offer not for revenge, but for love. She believed that if she continued to search for Theo—as an avenger if that had to be the case—she would one day be reunited with him.

One day, she had been acting separately from Rudi as she undertook a mission concerning a certain incident connected to the Organization. That day, she finally found the vampire she was searching for.

Theodosius, living in hiding and in fear of the sins he had committed.

Alongside a certain girl who had been supporting him all that time.

Theresia was jealous of the girl—Elsa—who had become a vampire and was now in hiding alongside Theo.

"...The rest is just as you might imagine. Overcome with envy, Theresia devoured the third survivor of the massacre! Although I suppose, to humans, it might be difficult to call this girl a survivor when she had been turned into a vampire."

Theresia listened in silence. She neither acknowledged nor denied his claims, standing there as though lost in her own memories.

"That vampire should then have returned to dust. I know nothing of that white coffin." Zygmunt said with a meaningful look, turning to Doctor solemnly. But he was not the only

one. Melhilm, Rudi, Theresia, Relic, Ferret, and all other eyes in the cavern were now fixated upon him.

<Doctor...>

The coffin at the center of the story, more concerned about Doctor's emotional state than the question of her own identity, whispered his name.

Spurred by the many gazes bearing down upon him, Doctor hung his head and mumbled as though to himself:

"I... I was scared of losing Elsa."

Elsa was crumbling to ash before his very eyes. As soon as they had escaped from Theresia, Theo had poured out most of his blood over Elsa's body. Her flesh had mostly rotted away and her bones were exposed, but he continued to spill his blood into her coffin.

Was what happened next a miracle, or a nightmare?

Elsa's remains—her bones—became a vampire. Had she been revived, or had a new creature been born?

Was this vampire without memories really Elsa?

Though he still had many questions, Doctor eventually came to accept her. Afraid to give her a name, he always insisted on calling her 'Professor'.

And so, time passed.

The avenger in the middle of the events of the past was at once the centerpiece and a voiceless puppet. He hung his head, hiding his expression from sight.

Until just moments earlier, he had been so confused by the massive quantities of information entering his head that he could avoid piecing together the truth. He could scatter that information into chaos in order to deceive himself.

But things came together piece by piece, filling Rudi's heart to its furthest corners with the truth.

'Sis saved Theo? And he lived with her?

'He's lying. He must be lying. How is that possible? That can't be. And even if Theo subjugated Sis, why would Theresia kill her?'

And if he were to take everything he heard at face value, he would reach one inevitable conclusion.

"...That day, when Elsa said, 'I wish you never existed', she wasn't talking to you... But me."

'Shut up. Shut up. Shut up shut up shut up shut up this is a lie no more please I am sick of lies it's disgusting it's all lies everything is a lie the world is a lie.'

His sentiments echoed back and forth through his mind like a magic spell, slowly tightening his gut with anxiety.

'I don't want to hear any more lies. If the people I trusted, my past, and my entire world is a lie... Then I... I won't let that world exist any longer.'

'This is all a pain. Such a bother.'

'Heh. Heh. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah...'

The air quickly grew cold as Relic realized that his instincts were setting off alarm bells in his head. He looked around to survey the cavern without a second thought.

'What?'

The moment he caught sight of the avenger, Relic felt goosebumps forming on his skin.

The young man's blood vessels were more clearly visible on his skin than ever before. Flesh dribbled from his fingertips as though melting. His eyes, filled with the determination to destroy everything, looked much like a bomb whose fuse had run out, pondering which way to ricochet.

'This is bad. I don't know what's happening, but... that man is trouble.'

Relic was not the only one to sense the danger posed by Rudi, who now knew everything. And even before the matter of the air around him, no one would have wanted to approach him in the moments after his finding out the truth.

Zygmunt would not let this chance slip by.

"Look out, everyone. Don't get any closer to him." Relic said.

'I have to protect Hilda...'

Immediately after warning the others to stay back, Relic quickly looked around to search for the girl whose face rose most prominently in his thoughts.

She was standing there, no different from usual.

She was showing Relic a perfectly intact smile, sending her gentle gaze his way.

Of course, at the moment, her eerily casual expression was dissonance itself. Although Relic's sense of reason told him so, the waves of emotion surging in his heart easily overpowered such a rational conclusion.

Hilda, under Zygmunt's control, leapt from the ground where she stood.

She was headed straight toward the slender form of Rudi, who stood in the middle of the execution grounds.

"Hil-"

Relic had no time to think. And even if he did, he would have regardless made the same decision.

He slipped between Hilda and Rudi with incredible agility, standing before her to keep her safe. With Hilda behind his back, Relic swore to himself that he would protect her at all costs from Rudi's wrath.

But at that very moment, Hilda—with her ever-constant smile—wrapped her arms around Relic's neck and restrained him from behind.

"...!"

Relic would normally have no problem fighting off this level of force, but he had been caught completely off guard. He was rendered immobile for a single precious second.

Standing before Relic, whose movement had been halted, Rudi did as his Eater instincts dictated.

He ruthlessly sunk his teeth into Relic's arm, tearing off flesh without a moment's hesitation.

"...Ugh!"

Relic was overcome by agony. It felt as though his senses had been erased from part of his body. It was an insurmountable feeling of loss, as though part of his very power was being sucked away from him.

On the contrary, Rudi's body was filled with an incredible surge of energy, madly running through his senses like electricity. His latest meal was on an entirely different level from those in which he had partaken before. If ordinary vampires were the Eater's equivalent of food, this was closer to being injected with a powerful, instant-acting stimulant. Though he felt great power under his control, he had also become slave to it.

And so, Rudi was once more led by his instincts to gain more of that sublime power. He lunged for Relic's carotid artery.

"Rudi!"

At that moment, Rudi's mind, lost in the current of power, was held back by one vampire's call.

'Theo.'

Quickly registering the owner of the voice, a sliver of sanity was restored to Rudi's unstable mind.

"Rudi... I'm the one you're after, aren't I?"

As Rudi teetered on the verge of madness, the voice of his most hated foe entered his ears. It was a desperate plea from one he had once called a friend.

"Th... Theo..."

"Rudi... if you're still in there, please... I have just one request."

Rudi could feel something ominous looming overhead. He broke out into cold sweat. But unable to cover Doctor's mouth or his own ears, he stood rooted to the spot and listened.

"Rudi. I know that what I'm about to tell you is probably going to make you even more angry."

'It can't be... are you really going to say...? No... stop... Don't say it!'

"And I know that I really have no right to be saying this. But Rudi... I'm still going to say it."

'Stop... stop stop stop stop stop!'

"I don't care what you do to me. I don't care if you spend the next hundred years killing me slowly. But the others have nothing to do with this! So please, Rudi! Just end it with me! I'm the only one you have to hurt!"

For a split second, the image of the boy Rudi met earlier that day—Michael—overlapped with Theodosius, standing before him. And,

"DON'T SAY IIIIIIIIT!"

'Saying that stuff won't make me angry, Theo! It won't make me hate you! It's... it's only going to drive me to despair!'

"AAAHHHHHH!"

Rudi's despair took the form of a scream.

It had been summoned to this world by Rudi's own hands, brought to destroy everything—his own self.

The sacrifices had been chosen. Rudi himself, and Theo.

Once they were offered up, he would be destroyed. His despair would break him to pieces. It would lock his world in utter darkness. With his belief in all else shattered, Rudi cried out at the top of his lungs.

Melhilm coldly watched Rudi, whose skin was crumbling like rags.

"Hmph. I have no objections to watching a subject's body fall to pieces." He said, smiling with all the emotion of a scientist who was losing a somewhat valuable specimen, "but if even his mind is shattered in the process... that is the end."

But Melhilm's voice no longer reached Rudi. A monster was coming to life in the execution grounds.

Swallowed by the currents of power, even the young man's heart was crumbling.

But there was one thing clear in his sights.

The nemesis who had stolen away all he had held dear.

The one who had forced him to betray his beloved sister.

The one who had shown him a new world.

The one who had destroyed that world.

The one he had met in the forest.

The vampire boy.

His friend.

His nemesis.

Theo.

Theodosius M. Waldstein.

"THEO—!"

Rudi moved like lightning.

Now little but violence in human form, the Eater launched himself straight toward Theo.

By the time the others had realized what he was doing, it was already too late. Though possessed of unimaginable strength, Rudi was collapsing from the inside out. The heart that should have prevented such a collapse had long been broken to bits.

His final thoughts would not be that of his parents. Nor would it be of Theresia or Elsa.

But Theodosius M. Waldstein.

There was nothing left for Rudi but the boy from his past.

No one could stop him now.

Relic, Ferret, and the werewolves—all were convinced of Doctor's impending death.

But there was one vampire in particular who could not accept such a fate.

Up to that point, watching was all she could do.

She had neither the right to intervene nor the knowledge of who was right and who was wrong.

Though she believed herself powerless to do a thing, she thought of one thing and one thing alone—that she would step in should anyone be on the verge of being killed.

This place had been created for punishment. She had said so herself.

But she had done nothing but wait, trying to prevent the very purpose of this place—trying to prevent all from receiving the punishment of death.

And the time had finally come.

The girl had put down her roots in the ground, but she used the momentum of withdrawing them to fly forward.

She leapt forth with great force, faster than the wind—faster than Rudi, who had become a monster—

Unhindered by the friction that threatened to eat away at her body, she leapt between Theo and Rudi.

There was a sound like something bursting.

Chunks of red flew across the cavern.

Selim dazedly looked up at the bits of red, her thoughts slowly departing far away.

Somewhere deep within her memories.

Her consciousness was led to the moment of her own birth.

And her past flashed by before her eyes like a dream.

The past replayed itself to the alraune in human form.

It was a past that should not be remembered,

But also one that should not be forgotten.

†

Centuries ago. A town square in a certain country.

"..."

"..."

"..."

At first, it was nothing more than a flower possessed of a will.

It spoke no language, knew no names of the things it could see around itself.

It did not know what it meant to think.

'Ah... Oh...

'What. Am I? Is this place? What? Ah...'

But the flower with a sense of self was curious about the world around itself.

It absorbed the sounds that made its petals tremble. It focused its senses on the fact that light reflected off all sorts of surfaces, delivering information about colors and shapes. The flower, which possessed neither ears nor eyes, had already begun a transcendent process of evolution.

'So tasty.

'I wonder why this red water is so tasty.

'It comes down from the sky whenever the sun is at its highest.'

It had a surplus of voices from which to draw practice.

Although the flower was usually accompanied only by the wooden scaffolding next to it, humans gathered at the square each day and talked about all sorts of things.

'I hear that sound.

'I hear it again.

'Every time I hear a thud, blood falls from the sky.

'So much blood falls from human necks.'

Each time the guillotine claimed a new victim, the flower was showered with a gush of blood.

The flower was granted this peculiar source of nutrition more often than rain. The blood fell into the soil and sank deep where its many branching roots lay, absorbed into the flower and making it cleverer and stronger.

But the words that usually flew around the guillotine twisted the flower's soul in one particular direction. Of course, from a vampire's perspective, it was a perfectly natural bend of morality borne from a perfectly natural instinct.

As the flower grew to learn more and more about humanity, it occasionally wondered about its own identity. But drunk on the daily bath of blood, the flower quickly stopped caring.

'Heh. Heh. Someone got killed again.

'Oh, this feels great. I love the feeling of blood raining down on me.

'I hope they kill more and more people. I hope they execute more.'

'Stain your hands even more, you ruthless executioner.

'It's not just the blood. Their cheers, too. Their cheers are music to my ears.

'More blood. More cheering. More cries of the damned.'

"Any last words?"

The executioner's mechanical statement served as a signal for the alraune's feast.

Each time a criminal was executed at the guillotine, the people gathered in the square roared in ecstasy. The flower loved that sound.

Rooted at the center of the hurrahs, the flower felt as though it was being praised by all the world.

The people—the prey—gathered around it and cried out in joy.

The screams of the criminals made it feel as though it were in the position of absolute power.

But the flower eventually grew to realize that that was all just a misunderstanding.

The humans were cheering for the entertainment of the execution, taking place overhead on the guillotine. And the criminals never once spared the flower a glance.

No one among the throngs gathered at the square paid the flower any mind.

The flower was alone.

It was lonely, not knowing a thing about what it was.

'I need more.

'I need more blood. So much more.

'I want you to scream for me.

'I want you to cheer for me.

'Not just during the day. I want to feel alive, even at night.

'I want to feel alive because it's night...'

The alraune began to consider one day slipping out of the ground and cutting humans' throats to drink their blood.

There had been no rain for several weeks, and the executions had also been put on hold for several days. The alraune was starving, finally beginning to seriously consider using its own roots to cut off the feet of those who walked by.

But one night, under the full moon, a lone girl appeared before the flower under the guillotine.

'...Is this... water?'

Realizing that something cold was trickling down from overhead, the flower turned its consciousness overhead.

Standing there was a girl holding a small container, scooping water onto the alraune.

"Are you all right? It's been a while since it last rained. I thought you were looking a little down."

'...A human girl?'

The girl wearing large spectacles smiled at the flower in bloom, her expression a mix of joy and loneliness.

"You know... I knew all along that you were growing here."

At first, the alraune thought that the girl knew it had a will of its own. But from the sounds of things, the girl was probably talking to herself.

"I wonder why no one else noticed. You've been blooming here for an entire year without wilting now."

Yet she was indeed speaking also to the alraune.

It was a first for the flower, to be spoken to in any way by anyone.

"You're blooming so beautifully, so I wonder why..."

Looking up at the girl's downcast face, the flower began to feel its own loneliness slowly dissipate.

"I'm sorry. You must be doing your very best to live, right?"

But as though in the flower's place, the girl's loneliness grew more and more pronounced in her smile.

'This girl was looking at me all this time.'

Looked at by someone for the first time in its life, the flower felt a new emotion sprouting in its heart.

'I'm... happy.'

'So I hope that this girl will be happy too.'

From that night onwards, the girl visited the guillotine every night to give clean water to the flower.

And at some point, the flower began to truly love seeing the girl come to visit.



It gained greater joy from her company than being showered in blood, being at the center of the crowd's cheers, and listening to the screaming of the criminals.

After all, the girl recognized its presence and looked after it.

She was living testimony to the fact of its existence.

The flower listened to the girl many times over, chewing over her words and their meanings.

And eventually, the girl became the flower's standard of humanity.

The girl's words had affected the thoughts and identity of the inhuman creature.

Before it knew what was happening, the flower had lost its thirst for blood.

Time passed again, and the girl came to the flower with a strangely different self-confession.

"This is amazing. You've been blooming here for two years now without wilting once."

Although her smile was as lonely as ever, the flower was still happy. The girl cared for its existence. The very idea gave it great joy.

"If there's a flower spirit living inside you, I want to make a wish."

'...?'

They had known each other for a long time, but the girl never realized that the flower possessed a sense of self. Understanding that, the flower clung to her every word.

"Many more people are going to die here from now on. So please... don't wilt away. Please stay in bloom forever."

The flower was overcome by a strange sensation.

"Please let the people see your beauty in this town square. I'm sure someone besides me will notice you. So please..."

'...What... is she saying?'

"Everyone says that those people being executed are evil, but please let them see your beauty too. I've seen so much of you already, so please let others see you too."

Fear swelled in the flower's heart as it desperately tried to understand what the girl was trying to say.

"No one in this world is truly evil."

But her lonely smile remained inscrutable as she uttered:

"And if anyone is truly evil, it must be me. After all, even though I know that no one is evil... I still can't bring myself to forgive them."

'Wait—'

It had been one year and several months since their first meeting. But this was the first time that the flower had ever tried to speak to the girl. It was gripped by the feeling that the girl was bound for some faraway place, never to return.

But having no mouth or vocal cords, and possessing no telepathic ability, the powerless flower's words echoed only in its own mind.

And the flower's fears soon became reality.

The next evening, the girl did not come to visit.

Nor the next evening, nor the one after.

Perhaps she had collapsed of an illness. Perhaps she had been rendered immobile in an accident. Perhaps she was dead.

All kinds of scenarios went through the flower's mind as it understood for the first time the meaning of fear.

Realizing just how important this girl was to itself, the flower shook in fear of losing her.

Two days later, as the flower languished in terror, the girl finally appeared once more.

But her visit was not at night, as it usually was.

The sun was at its highest point.

The square was filled with people.

The girl emerged at the center of everything, on the guillotine that loomed above the flower.

'Huh...?'

The girl was still quite young for someone being executed there. Perhaps that was why so many people were gathered.

"I heard she stabbed the assemblyman."

"He was in a rage about this being a coup d'état, but he probably ordered this out of spite."

"Well, he's the one who sent her father to die at the guillotine. And now the daughter's gotten herself into this mess."

"Shush. Someone'll hear you. Anyway, did you hear? The assemblyman's already recovered completely."

"But treason's treason. I can't believe this."

"In other words, they want us to know we're not supposed to go against them."

"But a girl that young... normally she'd be sent to the gallows."

"Maybe the assemblyman wanted to make a point."

"That too, but I heard the girl asked for the guillotine herself."

"Wha..." "Gives me the chills." "Kill her." "I wish we could do something..."

Countless voices filled the square, but no one honestly made to try and rescue the girl.

Even in the midst of their whisperings the crowds swelled into one gigantic circle, surrounding the guillotine. They looked up at the glinting blade, some unable to hide their grim expressions, and others laughing as though watching a piece of entertainment.

And the moment the girl was brought up to the stand,

The square was filled with a cheer no different from what the flower had heard at the moment of any other execution.

'No... no...'

Countless thoughts swirled through its head like a storm, refusing to organize themselves into coherent notions.

Why did the girl have to die?

The roar of the crowd, once a glorifying cheer of worship, were now a thousand voices shouting a criminal's curses.

The flower wondered if it had reveled in the execution-goers' hurrahs even at the death of the girl's father.

It wondered if it had condescended at his screams.

"Any last words?" The executioner asked mechanically.

The girl said nothing, only shaking her head. But when the executioner reached out to remove her glasses, she declined.

"Could I... keep my glasses? I... I'd like to see the world until the end."

The executioner nodded silently and laid the girl under the guillotine frame. The cheers of the crowd grew more and more intense, the sound driving the people to even greater excitement.

'I have to save her. I have to save her.'

The flower tried to move its body, but it was impossible.

Before meeting the girl, it had been capable of a certain degree of movement. But once it abandoned the idea of moving around to seek out victims, it had never again considered the

idea of becoming mobile. After all, it was in want of nothing thanks to the girl's constant visits.

And so, the flower was powerless to save her.

The string attached to the blade of the guillotine had been pulled taut; the clamor of the crowds came to a stop. But that was only for a moment. The people whispered to those around them in excitement, each and every murmur building up to greater noise and once more giving way to shouts of exhilaration.

'Disgusting.'

But why was it so disgusted, the flower wondered.

The sound that had once given it such pleasure was now nothing short of sickening.

But even in the midst of all those emotions, the flower concentrated. It reached out overhead with its soul, trying to stretch its leaves toward the girl.

Then, it caught the eyes of the girl lying face-down under the blade.

Although the flower had no eyes of its own, the girl had definitely seen it.

"I'm so glad you're still in bloom."

And she delivered to the flower the final words that no human would hear.

The moment she caught sight of the flower, the loneliness disappeared from the girl's expression. Her smile was now truly genuine.

Though the crowds threatened to drown the girl's voice in the noise, the flower did everything it could to pick up the pieces of her words.

It tried to convince itself that, perhaps, so long as it continued to listen to her, her life would be preserved.

"Beautiful... You're so beautiful."

Was it the flower's self-righteous but tragic delusion? It almost seemed as though the girl was no longer talking to herself, as she usually had. This time, it was as though she knew clearly that the flower possessed a sense of self.

'Wait... Wait...!'

"Thank—"

Thud.

It was a painstakingly familiar sound.

Blood splattered over the flower like rain.

The shouts of the people reached the heavens.

The force of the impact knocked the girl's glasses off, and they plummeted down a gap in the scaffolding. The moment the flower saw this, it knew that she was dead.

Was the girl's severed head smiling to the last as it lay in its basket?

The executioner hoisted her head into the air to show the crowds, but the flower could not see from its position. Of course, even if the executioner had brought the head before the flower, the flower would still never have looked upon it.

After all, the flower had averted its senses from the scene.

It had run away from the girl's death.

That night, the flower was wallowing in grief, covered in the girl's blood.

It despised itself for being so powerless. It despised the lonely days to come.

Each time it heard the sound of the guillotine—each time it partook in a meal, it would remember her.

The bespectacled girl's smile would not leave its thoughts.

'I'll kill them.'

Soon, the flower's grief turned to hatred. The alraune nursed a growing sense of animosity at the world.

'I'll kill them. I'll kill them all! Why did she have to die?! Why? She loved the townspeople more than anyone else! I'll kill them all. The one who beheaded her, the one who sentenced her to die, the one who created that guillotine, the ones that cheered at her death, and the ones who stood by without trying to help! I'll kill them. I'll slaughter them all! All of them. All of them! And... after I kill them... I'll die too.'

'After all... No one's going to look after me now...'

Suddenly, water fell from overhead and quickly cooled its petals, which had been hot with fuming rage.

'...?'

It was water from the well, no different from what it had tasted every day.

For a moment, the flower wondered if the girl had somehow returned. It focused its senses upwards in surprise. But it soon realized that the one standing there was a large man in his twenties, who was dressed somewhat like an aristocrat.

'Who...?'

Clouds obscured the moonlight. The flower could not see the man's face, but continued to concentrate its senses upon him.

Once the man finished watering the flower, he mumbled solemnly,

"...I don't know how much more time you have before you wilt away. But if nothing else, thank you for staying alive until today."

The voice was vaguely familiar to the flower, but it could not recall when exactly it had heard the man before.

And before even that, the flower had no idea why the man was speaking to it in the first place. Its anger and hatred momentarily turned to confusion at the man's sudden appearance.

"How mysterious... No. I think... I think I know why. You've been in bloom ever since that vampire, I think, was beheaded. Yes. I was looking at you all this time. Just like that girl who died today."

Unlike the way the girl had spoken, it almost seemed as though the man was aware of the flower's self-awareness.

The flower now knew—the girl was not the only one who had noticed it.

And this man even knew that it possessed a sense of self.

Shocked by the revelation, the flower struggled to understand who the man was.

"That girl... she worried for you to the very end. And she told me—after she was gone, there would be no one to water you. So she asked me if I could come look after you once in a while, if ever there were to be a drought."

'...?'

Something occurred to the flower about the man's identity. But unable to immediately confirm its suspicions, the flower silently listened to him.

"And mark my words, that's exactly what I'll do. I will water you every day. So... I know I'm in no position to be asking this of you, but please..."

The man gulped, swallowing a certain emotion as he continued. He stepped over to the flower with a complicated expression.

"Please... live on in her stead."

He spoke to the flower as he gazed upon its bloodstained petals, his voice filled with sorrow and anger.

"If you've drunk her blood, then drink in her soul as well. And... be happy. Be happy alongside that girl... alongside Selim."

The flower finally knew the name of the girl.

The man shook his head and looked at the flower with grim determination.

"I'm begging you..."

And once he finally hung his head, the clouds broke apart for a moment to illuminate the man's face in moonlight.

Written on his face was a look of utter sadness, deeper than that of any the flower saw on the girl.

The man's face, the flower then realized, was all too familiar.

It heard the man's voice every day. But it had taken it so long to realize because his voice never held emotion, and because his words were the same each time he spoke:

"Any last words?"

Watching the executioner depart, the flower remembered what the girl had said.

"No one in this world is truly evil."

Repeating her words in its head, the flower told herself:

'You were right.'

A moment later, the blood soaking into the soil around her was drawn into her roots without a drop left behind. Even the blood covering her leaves were soon absorbed into her cells.

"You were right. No one in this world is truly evil."

And so the flower filled her entire body—down to the very last cell—with one powerful desire.

'I have to move. I have to move.'

'So you're not an evil person either, Selim. You shouldn't have had to die. So... please...'

Her powerful strength of will manifested in the form of vampiric powers. Her roots began to move as she slowly reached out toward the space under the guillotine. At first, her movements were slow and sluggish. But as her cells became accustomed to the action, she began to slide more gracefully toward her destination.

'Please. Let's live on together.'

Several minutes later, the flower's roots were clutching the glasses lying under the scaffolding.

By the time she saw herself in the reflection of the spectacles, the flower's heart had been cleansed of hatred and regret.

Time passed.

Having taken on the form of a human girl, the alraune began to call herself 'Selim Vergès'.

'Selim' was the name of the girl.

'Vergès' was the surname of the executioner who spent his entire life beside the guillotine.

He came to water Selim every day from that day onwards, until he finally passed away of old age many decades later.

And time passed once more.

†

The girl realized that the rain of red was not the splash of her own blood.

Then she realized that it was not blood to begin with.

The sound of something bursting had indeed meant something was destroyed, but it was not her own body.

It was the round green object that had jumped in to save her.

The watermelon's shell was crushed like jelly, and its ripe insides flew gracefully through the air in many pieces.

It scattered like rain—the red rain that had in the past showered Selim under the guillotine.

It sparkled ever so brightly and beautifully.



11章

守り神は卵から生まれ出で

Chapter 11 - The Guardian Spirit Hatches from its Shell

What has happened to me?

Why'd I go an' protect Selim?

We understood fully that We would break in the process. So why?

What, pray tell, will happen to this one now?

No! No! I don't wanna die yet!

My body... is going to fade...

...This character of mine is much too unstable. I... I must take physical form...

Val could not even tell where his existence lay.

†

The moment Selim leapt to protect Theo, Val thought his heart would stop. Perhaps the heart composed of his illusions and telekinesis had indeed frozen.

Selim would die.

Death took physical form in Rudi and shot straight toward Selim.

'I have to stop him.'

Why had the thought so strongly resonated in his mind? Val still could not answer that question. But he never had enough time to think for an answer in the first place.

His telekinesis would not reach the guillotine, where Selim was.

But if he tossed something, he might be able to stop Rudi.

A boulder, a rock, anything. Anything he could throw.

But the cavern was filled with solid stalactites, not a single loose stone in sight. Val could already taste the despair of Selim's death.

At that moment, something occurred to him. The word 'death' suddenly reminded him of a potential weapon that had been within his reach. It was not as solid as a stone, but it was still a projectile.

There was no time to waste. Val did not even have the time to think about the implications of his next course of action. Within seconds, his plan was set in motion.

His soul used telekinesis to lift up the spherical object at his feet.

And the object was chucked at Rudi's temple as he lunged at Selim.

†

Crush.

It was not a very pleasant noise.

†

The watermelon appeared out of nowhere, interrupting Rudi's attack. Val had thrown it with all his might, and despite the relative fragility of his weapon, the impact of the blow rattled Rudi. He lost his balance and staggered against one of the cavern walls.

"What...?"

Red chunks were flying everywhere.

When they realized that the chunks belonged to a watermelon, those who knew Val's true form were the first to react.

"VAL!"

"Valdred!"

Most were astonished at Theodosius and Melhilm's sudden outcry. Selim and the jester turned to where the green-haired boy had been standing moments earlier.

But there was no one there.

The boy who had been among them until mere seconds ago disappeared from the cavern the moment the watermelon was smashed.

†

'I need physical form.

'Something. Anything. I... I need a core.

'It doesn't even have to be an object. I just need something to sustain me.

'Something. Something. Anything...'

The moment his core was shattered, Val's consciousness was scattered all over the cavern in a state of shock. He faintly recalled that Doctor had said he could live on even without a core, so long as he believed it would be all right.

But Val was in too much panic to believe. He had already been searching for a self in which he could place his trust. In this state, how could he even begin to extend that search to something new?

The moment the thought occurred to him, Val's consciousness dispersed even more.

It was only a matter of time before he disappeared.

'No.

'No. No. No. I don't want to disappear. I... I still...

'Isn't there anything I can cling to

'Someone

'Anything'

As his consciousness grew faint, Val desperately tried to keep his sights on the situation in the cavern. Perhaps he could find himself a new core—even a piece of the shattered watermelon, if necessary.

But what he saw first was a horrifying scene.

Rudi stood from having been thrown against the wall, and once more charged at Theo.

It was as though Selim, standing resolutely between them, was of no concern to him.

'Selim is going to die.

'Why? Please, no.

'Don't kill her.

'Someone stop him. Please don't let Selim die.

'I promised her I'd show her the outside world.

'Then I'd be able to listen to her story.

'...That's right! I bet that's where I could find my answer.

'So... what I have to do now...

'Is to protect Selim.

'I think... it's thanks to Selim and Michael that I could find a purpose.'

'...?

'Hey, what do you know.

'I found myself a new core.

'It was right here all this time.

'I can't believe I never noticed something this big...'

†

This time, there was truly nothing that could stop Rudi.

Relic had very nearly caught up to his speed, but Rudi lashed out to clear a path and again approached Selim as Relic staggered back.

She was standing in his way to Theo. Rudi swung his arm into the air in preparation for one fatal strike.

His hand fell toward the lovely alraune without a moment's hesitation.

'...What is this?

'What... what just stopped me?

'What did I just hit?'

Rudi's attack had been halted just above Selim's head.

Though there seemed to be nothing there, Rudi felt something. If he had truly hit only thin air, the alraune's head would have already been smashed.

A moment later, an even more pressing question rose to mind.

'Why?

'Why... why am I...

'Why am I lying on the ground...?!"

The moment his confusion peaked, a gust of wind shook the cavern, forming words that pierced his ears.

"...Don't kill her... Don't kill Selim!"

It sounded like the voice of the green-haired vampire from earlier.

But Rudi could not even begin to guess at where the voice was coming from. As he looked around from the ground, pinned by an invisible force, he saw the jester, Ferret, and even Doctor looking around for the owner of the voice.

The undeniable truth was that something was holding him down.

The Eater who had taken hold of ultimate power had been forced to lay flat, humiliated and unable to even fight back.

'Why... Why?'

To his shock, he spotted Theresia and Melhilm far behind him, also forced flat on the ground.

His powers leashed, Rudi slowly began to regain his calm and his memories.

But no tranquility could help him understand what was happening now. Had some vampire with unusual powers suddenly intervened? That was the only explanation he could think of.

His conjecture was only half-correct.

The pool of blood—the only being in the cavern who was aware of what was happening—spread himself out throughout the cavern and scrawled banner-sized words of congratulation.

[I see... you have changed the form of your own soul, Valdred! Nay, Valdred Ivanhoe the Magnificent, one who has destroyed one of the very limits of our kind!]

To the viscount's senses, Val's soul had always been in the form of a watermelon. But now, that shape was nowhere to be found in his eyes.

And yet Val's voice and powers were clearly present.

At first, even the viscount had hesitated. But the moment he realized that Val's form had not disappeared, but had rather become impossible to sense, he trembled in awe at the birth of the new vampire.

[You, my dear friend... You...]

When the viscount finally completed his sentence, the eyes of all those who occupied the cavern turned to dinner plates.

[You... have become one with this very island! With your second—no—first homeland, this island of Growerth! You have broken through the shell of your watermelon, and at that very moment, hatched into our island's guardian spirit!]

Though the viscount's claims grew more exaggerated toward the end, they nonetheless informed everyone in the cavern of what had just taken place.

The moment of realization was immediately followed by an embarrassed, disembodied voice.

"Um... I guess... I guess you're right, sir. But 'guardian spirit' sounds kind of... embarrassing, I guess?"

Although Val's voice was rather sheepish, the fact that he had not been erased from existence—the fact that he was alive—brought great relief to Relic and the others.

The voice continued self-consciously, addressing the entire cavern:

"So... What do you want me to do with these people?"

†

"...Kill me..." Rudi mumbled to no one in particular, pinned to the ground, "if I can't have my revenge, then I'd rather die."

The boy who had once abandoned his sister to escape the despair of death was now spurred by despair to seek death.

But the vampire who approached him spelled out the truth in large letters:

[I shall do no such thing. In fact, I shall do nothing to you in particular. And I shall make certain that you do nothing to my children.] The letters of blood wrote. Rudi glared, his face set.

"What... are you planning...? I don't need your pity..."

[Do not misunderstand me. This is *punishment*. We shall do nothing, and I shall say nothing more to you. And I shall involve myself in no matter that concerns you from this point onwards. And so, I have my revenge.]

Ferret seemed to want to say something, but the firm composition of the viscount's words lent them the weight of an emotion she had rarely seen. She stood back, knowing that the viscount's show of forgiveness was not borne of hypocrisy or cheap pity.

Finally, the viscount finished with a sharply-written conclusion:

[After all, you are already trapped in the cycle of vengeance and repentance... for all eternity.]

Once the viscount's words registered in his mind, Rudi's consciousness finally slipped away.

"Such an unbelievable conclusion. It seems the fulfillment of my primary purpose has become impossible." Sighed Zygmunt's Branch, "but... if nothing else, I shall retrieve my bait as an apology to Comrade Caldimir."

[...What are you planning, Zygmunt the Green?]

"...I insinuate the obvious. I shall retrieve the test subject you call a son. Know that no amount of resistance will prevail."

Though the countless hostages in Zygmunt's grasp should have worried the viscount, the latter's confidence refused to vanish.

[I cannot agree with your claim, I fear.]

"What?"

[As I said to Melhilm earlier, I am here to resolve this situation. Though the traditional method would require lengthy and cautious negotiations, this island is out of time. It will be a true disaster if we cannot end this standoff before Garde arrives.]

"Garde...?"

Zygmunt paused at the mention of the name.

Ignoring the Branch, the viscount moved over to Relic and floated down before his son, who was shaking Hilda's shoulders in an attempt to break the subjugation over her.

[Ah, my son. It won't do for a man who is soon to be in the leader's seat to be flustered so.]

"...?"

Unable to fully understand the meaning of his father's comment, Relic opened his eyes wide.

The viscount proudly spread his body into the air, and wrote in large letters as though making an announcement:

[Ah, my friends! Tonight, I have made the decision to hand over my title as Lord of Growerth to my son Relic!]

"Father...! You can't be serious! Why now?"

[This is no jest, Relic! It is precisely the time for such a declaration, as I wish to make clear that the one who saves this island from peril must be the Lord of Waldstein Castle. And to rescue these many lives, you must truly make sense of the fact that you are a ruler. Understand that the people of this island are as good as a part of your very being.]

Taking note of the gravity dripping from the viscount's advice, Relic took some time to consider his words. And once he realized just what it was that his father intended for him to do, Relic shuddered.

"Father... you can't be serious."

But Relic's tremblings soon came to a stop. He chuckled wryly and took Hilda by the shoulders.

"Seriously. If I hadn't seen Val do something that amazing just now, I'd never have thought this would be possible."

As the others watched doubtfully, Relic locked eyes with Hilda and said in a lonely voice:

"I won't apologize for drinking your blood, Hilda. But... once you come to, I'll apologize properly about doing it while you weren't yourself."



With that, Relic sank his glinting fangs into her pale neck.

His teeth slid easily into her throat and drew blood from her body.

It was an almost erotic scene to behold, but there was no passion in the boy's expression—it looked more like he was gently and calmly restoring warmth to the girl's body.

From Zygmunt's point of view, Relic's actions had come out of nowhere. But he nodded in realization.

"So you would overpower my subjugation with your own in order to free these humans?" He asked, never once losing his smile as he pointed out the flaw in Relic's plan, "but what of the boy called Michael? He is in the hospital, out of your reach. If I were to subjugate him and order him to cease breathing..."

As Zygmunt refused to lose his advantage, Relic slowly withdrew his fangs.

"I didn't drink Hilda's blood to subjugate her."

"...What?"

The boy who had become the Lord of Growerth smiled confidently.

"It was to gain power. The absolute power that's going to let me subjugate the entire island!"

A moment later, the people of Growerth scattered, in a very literal sense.

†

It was utter chaos.

In a matter of moments, all of Growerth was swallowed in confusion.

Just like the previous year, when Relic had turned the island itself into fog and bats, everything was covered in a thick mist. Bats spouted upwards in pillars all over the island, as though supporting the weight of the heavens.

But this time, there was a difference. The bats this time were not elements of the island itself, but the hundreds of thousands of humans who were on Growerth.

The crowd of thousands surrounding Waldstein Castle, the hundreds of people wandering the streets, and the many people around the island going about their business—all had been transformed at once, alongside the clothes and accessories they wore.

Transformed into flocks of bats, they flew into the air and coughed out fog from their mouths before themselves turning into fog. The haze then hovered for some time before solidifying again into flocks of bats.

By the time the humans found themselves on the ground where they had been standing moments earlier, only the foreign substance—Zygmunt's blood—was left floating in the air.

Flocks of bats soared into the sky. The fog rested upon the beautiful decorations adorning the island.

It was as though the island itself was celebrating the birth of a new Master of Night.

†

The scene in the cavern was little different from the one taking place aboveground.

Hilda, her body turned into fog and a flock of bats, circled around Relic for a moment before finally materializing again in his arms.

Zygmunt's other Leaves, who had been dragged there alongside her, also turned into flocks of bats and flew out of the cavern.

"It can't be...?! Synchronizing with so many humans at once...?!"

Zygmunt cried out in shock at the sensation of so many Leaves withering away. He glared at the new Lord of Waldstein castle, who met his gaze.

"I won't stand for this. As the lord who governs the island at night, I won't let you get away with interfering with the islander's lives."

"What...?!"

The moment Zygmunt's Branch cried out, a great mouth opened up under his feet. He fell and the hole closed over him.

Relic concentrated, slowly turning part of the earth into fog and transporting the intruder out of the castle. And once he had completed the task, he turned to Hilda.

Having regained consciousness, Hilda tilted her head and looked at Relic.

"Relic? What is this place? I thought I was at the hospital..."

There was too much to explain at once, but there was only one thing Relic wanted to say as he embraced her.

"Hilda... I'm so glad you're okay!"

"Relic?"

Hilda seemed to be surprised by the sudden embrace, but she caught sight of the sincere joy in his eyes and wrapped her arms around him. She asked no questions about the stinging pain in her neck, as though words weren't necessary to communicate how they felt.

Melhilm, meanwhile, had been freed from Val's restraint. He turned to his old friend.

"Gerhardt. How much about this incident did you really know from the very beginning?"

[Ah, I confess that I knew almost everything from the start. Everything about Zygmunt, Rudi and Theresia, and even Caldimir's true plans, of which Dorothy and the others knew nothing. And of course, you personally informed me of your plans earlier this evening. Things truly never change, my old friend. I expected nothing less than a proud declaration before you put your plans into action.]

"I don't remember mentioning Rudi or Valdred in our conversation." Melhilm pointed out.

[Aha! I merely entertained many informants today, Melhilm. And as for Caldimir's plot, I was contacted by Garde. To go to the trouble of logging into an online game from an internet cafe in the mainland to receive my email address from a mutual party member! Most astounding, do you not agree?]

The viscount went on to reveal why he had been so pressed for time just minutes earlier.

[...I do believe it's nearly time for Garde to arrive. It truly is a relief that everything was resolved quickly! Even I cannot say I could stop a head-on battle between Garde and Zygmunt.]

"...Huh?"

"Hey! Those brats're gone!"

The moment after the sudden burst of bats and fog, the freeloader vampires realized that Rudi and Theresia were nowhere to be found.

"Where'd they go?!" "Is Doc all right?!" "Shit... What's going on here?"

The one who answered their questions was the only enemy left in their midst.

"...It seems Theresia has taken Rudi and fled."

"No way! ...Actually, what are you still doing here?" One of the vampires wondered, shooting Melhilm a sharp look.

"I still have unfinished business that needs taking care of."

The boy at the end of Melhilm's gaze shrank back for a moment, but soon clenched his fists and looked the older man in the eye.

"...What will happen to Rudi now?"

"We have no way of knowing. He's survived for the moment, but the next time he fights outside his armor, I cannot guarantee that he will keep his life, even if I manage to hold him back as I did today. Either his body or his mind will perish, and that will be the end of him."

Theo said nothing.

"...Trying to think of a way to save that Eater? You think that will be enough to cleanse you of your sins? And a failure like you, even attempting such a thing? Preposterous!"

A failure.

Having also been on the receiving end of such a comment, Val looked at Doctor's face with concern.

Doctor stood silently, hanging his head with a look of patient endurance.

But as though in his stead, Professor intervened with a haphazard swing of her arms.

<How could you say that?! If what we all heard just now is true, all of this was your fault to begin wi->

[Melhilm.]

The viscount's words were written out in midair, interrupting Professor's cries. They were composed, heavy words full of sentiment toward his old friend.

[The act of labeling something a success or a failure can wait until the results have been made clear, do you not agree?]

"The results have been made clear, Gerhardt. Fifteen years ago."

[It has long been an unfortunate habit of yours, old friend, to neglect taking into account the time required for a subject's maturation.]

Doctor, who had raised his head at some point, looked on at the viscount's words with fearful anticipation.

"Hmph. And by your methods, how long is it that I'm supposed to wait for these results?"

[As long as it takes, so long as the will lives on. Even if the body should rot away, as long as another takes up the will of those who have lost their lives, the dead will once more have potential for growth.]

The viscount's words had been drawn in a wall between Melhilm and Doctor, as though acting as a barrier. And despite the flipped perspective, Doctor felt as though the viscount's speech was directed at him.

"Illogical as always, Gerhardt." Melhilm chuckled bitterly. He looked down at Theo, who remained silent, and twisted his lips into a grin.

"...Interesting. Just try and save him if you can."

Theo still could not give a response.

[In any event, Melhilm, I believe it will be for the best if you left this island for today.]

"...I suppose you are right. But... I will not be satisfied now unless I take care of Shizune and Watt while I still have the opportunity."

[In your letter to him, did you not grant Watt complete absolution?]

"Not without the condition that should have been fulfilled. I have not yet reclaimed everything." Melhilm laughed, and suggested to his old friend, "Gerhardt. Have you really no

intention of cooperating with me? You know full well that Watt is after Relic's powers because he considers you an obstacle."

It was an honest offer, but it was as though Melhilm already knew Gerhardt's answer.

And the viscount did not betray his expectations.

[Watt does indeed see me as his enemy, but he is also a man who, as mayor, loves his city deeply. I could never face the people of this island if I were to murder him on account of my personal fears. And as for Miss Shizune, she poses no particular threat to the people as of the moment, so I have no reason to treat her with hostility.]

"...Then I'll just have to take that duty upon myself." Melhilm said coolly, his tone belying the hatred swirling through his eyes. Just like Rudi, he was also a guest who had brought animosity to Growerth.

"Not to worry, Gerhardt. I am not like Zygmunt or Caldimir. I do not—no. I *will* not allow innocent humans to become involved in my personal vendetta, unless it is for the good of the Organization."

Remembering how he had escaped Shizune's clutches by using the subjugated people as human shields, Melhilm hesitated slightly.

He turned around, not waiting for the viscount to respond.

But at that moment, he noticed his own shadow, casting into the depths of the cavern.

His shadow had taken on a strange tint.

But before that, he was struck by the fact that he cast such a striking shadow in the cavern, where light was coming from all directions. He instantly connected the dots and hurried to transform himself into a flock of bats.

A second later, a dark blue hand made of shadow reached upwards like a two-dimensional image reaching out to the third dimension, and tightly grabbed Melhilm's shoulder.

"...The I-Shadow!"

His shoulder in the grip of an inhumanly long arm, Melhilm looked down at the shadow underneath.

But the attacker betrayed Melhilm's expectations, not emerging from the shadow underneath but from behind him. Melhilm's other shoulder was caught in a second arm.

"Checkmate, Melhilm."

When he turned around, he found himself facing down a sharp-eyed Japanese man.

Melhilm looked around in shock, but other than Gerhardt, everyone looked just as surprised as he was. The man must have risen out of one of the other shadows cast in the cavern.

"...So you are here to take me back, Ishibashi?"

"My original mission was to stop Zygmunt from wreaking havoc, but if you choose to act upon your personal grudge, I will take you back by force for the sake of the Organization." Ishibashi said mechanically. Melhilm remained silent, perhaps still unwilling to give up and looking for a chance to transform and escape.

Noticing this, Ishibashi sighed.

"If you so much as try to transform into a flock of bats in order to flee, I *will* cut you down."

At some point, he had drawn a bamboo sword and was holding it in a right hand.

The hand that was holding Melhilm's shoulder was a right hand, but the mysterious arm that had risen from the shadows was also a right.

Then where was the left hand?

As some of those in the cavern began to ponder the question, the shadows cast not only under Melhilm, but against the ground and ceiling, and in corners the luminescent bacteria did not reach, all began to turn indigo.

And from each and every shadow rose up a two-dimensional image of a right hand holding a bamboo sword.

The two-dimensional shadow of the bamboo sword then rose up into the air, just like the right hand that was grasping Melhilm's shoulder.

The solid shadow cut off light, creating yet more shadows, from which emerged even more right hands holding bamboo swords. They filled the cavern, propagating like rats.

But in spite of the veritable army growing to assist him, Ishibashi remained cold as ice.

"This may only be a bamboo blade. But a shadow needs no sharpness."

Melhilm, surrounded by indigo silhouettes, smiled in defeat as he finally relaxed.

"To think you had accompanied Dorothy to Growerth... How in the world did Caldimir present this mission to the officers?"

"What were you expecting from that third-rate actor?" Ishibashi sighed, also relaxing slightly and dismissing about half of the blades rising from the shadows. The remainder were testament to just how wary he was of Melhilm.

"My word. If I'd taken you on this mission instead of the two Eaters, retrieving Valdred would have taken no effort whatsoever."

"I usually turn down such requests." Ishibashi said, not a hint of reverence in his tone. He only showed such deference to the viscount.

Melhilm was unaffected by Ishibashi's disrespectful tone. He sighed and bid farewell to Gerhardt.

"I suppose it's time for me to be off, Gerhardt. Perhaps we will meet again one day in our unending lives."

[I believe that time will come sooner than you might imagine, Melhilm.]

"...?"

Melhilm dwelled for a moment on the viscount's claim, not quite understanding what he meant. But he seemed to have recalled something else, turning to his old friend with a different subject.

"Come to think of it, where is Dorothy? I believe she should have arrived sometime this evening."

[Ah, yes. She has gone on to do business of her own. I'd have been quite content to spend some more time whispering my love to her, but it wouldn't do to keep her occupied.]

There was something rather lonely about the viscount's font, but it was also firm with trust for his fiancée.

[After all, in some ways, she plays a critical role in tonight's events.]

†

Neuberg City Hall. The Mayor's Office.

The mayor sat at his desk with both elbows on the mahogany surface. He sighed loudly.

Having determined that he would gain nothing from becoming involved in the chaos, he had returned to his office.

"How'd things go? Everything get covered up all right?"

"Yes, sir. The humans' memories of being turned into flocks of bats seem to be very vague. Most believe that the opening ceremony was merely canceled. Most of the confusion, it seems, stems from the fact that people found themselves in different places than they remembered, and at a much later time."

"So they don't remember a thing 'bout being ordered around by Zygmunt."

The humans probably only perceived the singers' concert being cut off. Or perhaps they felt as though they were shaking off a moment of hallucination.

But the confusion from the sudden movement of the humans seemed to be continuing. The incident on the thoroughfare with the cars probably wouldn't be resolved so easily.

"The people who woke up in the middle of the road... If nobody's hurt, we can just pass it off as one of those mass hallucinations. Call in a few counselors and make 'em remember seeing orange lights, and the tourism industry might even get a revenue boost."

It was the kind of statement that most people would reserve for a joke, but this man was capable—in more than one sense of the word—of putting such a plan into action. The secretary knew he was serious from the cold look in his eye.

The secretary busied herself with thoughts of what was to come. But then,

"Looks like you got lucky, Watt."

Shizune appeared behind him without a sound, just as she had several days earlier.

"What about?"

"Those people on the thoroughfare. If that charming gunman hadn't stepped in, I'd have slaughtered them all. And then you'd have a bit of trouble on your hands for the next election."

"...All I'd have to do then is accuse you of the whole goddamned thing. I could even forge records and frame you for terrorism, if you'd prefer that."

As they continued to make threats against one another, someone knocked on the door.

Watt was not scheduled to have any guests.

The secretary looked at the door curiously. The mayor brusquely addressed the person outside.

"C'mon in."

The heavy office door slowly swung open.

And from behind it emerged...

"Yo. We meet again."

"...It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Dorothy Nifas."

A man with a holstered toy gun and a woman wearing a pristine white dress.

"Um... sir, who are...?"

The secretary turned to Watt in confusion at the sight of the odd couple.

And for some reason, Watt flashed her a grin.

"I called 'em here earlier on my cell. Though it's my first time seeing the snow lady in person."

"...Pardon?"

How could he call someone he had never met before, the secretary wondered, but her confusion was only worsened by Watt's next statement:

"Are you seriously gonna keep playing dumb? 'Who are these people'? Gimme a fucking break."

"Pardon?"

But before the secretary could say any more, Watt covered her mouth with his hand and smashed her against the wall.

Her spine creaked. The back of her head was under immense pressure.

The secretary, grasping at consciousness, vaguely heard something coming from Watt's mouth.

"You know exactly who these people are. Don'tcha? Fuck that Caldimir. Can't believe he's been planning this shit all this time."

"...!"

'This man... He knows who I am.'

"Who... who told you about me?!"

"Take a guess. Anyway, good work 'til today." Watt said, ignoring the woman as her voice squeaked through his fingers. But he decided to pay her back for the day's humiliation, leaning in next to her ear and revealing the truth.

"Gerhardt was no good, but turns out I was the perfect man for the job. Laetitia decided I'd make things a little interesting tonight if I had her intel."

Zygmunt trembled in fury at the revelation of Laetitia's betrayal.

'Th-that vixen! ...After all Comrade Caldimir has done for her...!'

"Thank you. Please, leave the rest to me." Dorothy said with a smile, placing a hand on Zygmunt's head.

The water in Zygmunt's cells began to freeze.

Watt felt a terrifying chill in the air next to him and stepped away. If he had kept his hand over Zygmunt's mouth, his arm would have frozen solid.

The secretary's head was covered with frost. The muscles encased in ice slowly began to lose their function.

The frost spread all over her body, and the chill froze the vampire where she stood.

"Comrade... Caldimir..... my..... my..... apologies....."

Several seconds after her voice faded, Zygmunt Kiparis's Trunk was covered in ice. The water in her body had frozen solid, preventing her from moving or even thinking.

"You might have been a little more lovable if you were more like your fellow plant vampires Val and Selim." Dorothy said with a shake of the head, not yet realizing that Val had now become more frightening than even Zygmunt.

Then, she turned to Watt for information pertaining to the most important part of her mission.

"By any chance, does this island have a refrigerated transport service?"

†

Several minutes passed.

Dorothy rolled up Zygmunt in the rug that decorated the floor and left City Hall alongside Shizune. The latter quietly voiced her doubts, but Watt decided to ignore her.

'So things're finally gonna settle down. 'Bout time.' He thought, preparing to take a seat at his desk once more. But he realized that the blond gunman was still in the office.

"...What do you want?"

"Dunno how, but you knew about Zygmunt. Mr. Gerhardt heard everything from Miss Dorothy over the phone, and he contacted me afterwards. Everyone's snoring away now, but here's the thing..." The gunman said plainly, ignoring Watt's question, "Mr. Gerhardt thinks you mighta known 'bout Rudi and Theresia, too. What do you have to say 'bout that? Where'd that info come from?"

"Who they hell're they?"

"I'll just chill here 'til you decide to remember."

The gunman was there, not to assist in capturing Zygmunt, but to keep Watt under watch. It was a measure to make sure that, if Watt knew everything about what was happening, he would not be able to drink the blood of Rudi or Theresia. To prevent him from gaining Relic's powers by drinking the blood of an Eater who had recently drunk Relic's blood.

In other words, Bridgestone was under orders from the viscount to keep an eye out on Watt.

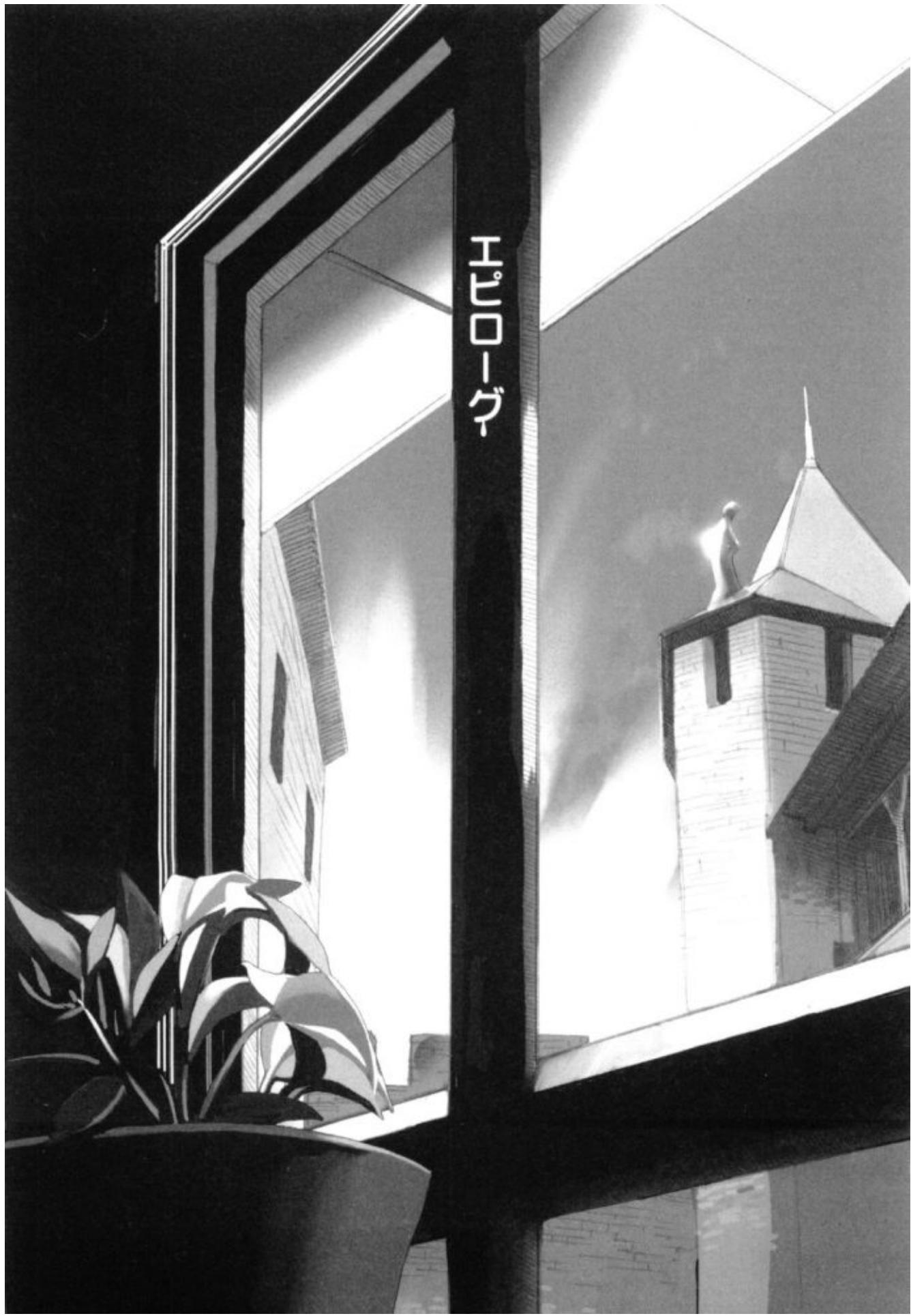
The mayor, realizing Bridgestone's purpose, made a face and did not even try to hide it.

"Shit..." He swore without even thinking.

If Shizune, the jester, or the viscount were here to hear, they would have noticed something strange. There was something different about the way he swore this time. A different emotion contained in his tone.

And though no one had yet realized, the commotion was coming to an end.

エピローグ



Epilogue A - No Night Ends Without a Dawn

Underground, Waldstein Castle. The Execution Grounds.

The vampire without a body was merely present.

It felt as though his body was there, yet not.

Even after everyone had returned to their own places, Val's consciousness was wandering the caverns.

"Val..."

That was when he heard a voice calling his name.

When he turned his senses toward the source of the voice, he saw a young girl standing there.

'...Beautiful...'

Even now, when he was free from the bounds of physical form and everything had been scrambled together, he thought the girl was lovely.

He could put words to his emotions.

'I knew it. That emotion I felt the moment I was born... it was real. I wasn't just imagining things when I was moved by seeing her for the first time.'

"Val...? Are you there?"

Remembering that she was calling his name, Val materialized his image before her. His powers worked in the same way as they had in the past. The only difference was that there was no longer a body around which he had to work.

"...Should we go, Selim? Or would tomorrow be better for you?"

Selim was taken aback by the unexpected question. But Val continued,

"Remember? I promised I'd show you around outside."

"Oh..."

Selim finally remembered Val's promise from earlier that day.

"Now, I can create illusions anywhere on this island, no matter how big they have to be. I can even make you look completely human. Although they're still just illusions." Val said sheepishly, but his tone soon grew shaky.

"I found myself this new form, if you could call it that. But to be honest, I don't know how long it'll last. For some reason, it feels like a single breeze could scatter me completely. I know I never liked being a watermelon... but it's actually a bit scary, not having it around."

He said, and turned to Selim with pleading eyes, "so Selim... before that happens, please stay with me. Before I disappear, I want to—"

"That's not going to happen! Val... that's... that's not going to happen. I... I drank your blood earlier, Val! And look at this!"

Selim stretched out her hands toward Val's consciousness, revealing the contents of her cupped palms.

Ripened black watermelon seeds.

When Val's body was smashed, Selim had panicked and gathered together the fragments of the watermelon. And once she realized that Val had abandoned his body, she drank through her roots the watermelon's juices—Val's blood. It was nothing more than an act of gathering nutrition as far as Val thought, but it meant something completely different to Selim.

"I've absorbed your blood, Val. So... so if you ever feel like you're going to disappear, please come back inside me. And... and I'll plant these watermelon seeds all over the island. I'll fill this island with you, so Val..."

Selim had never looked so human, Val thought. He looked into her teary eyes.

"So Val... please. Let's live on together."

"Why, Selim...? Why are you going so far for my sake...?"

He wanted to know more about her.

Although it wasn't quite the kind of thought that fit the situation at hand, Val felt as though he didn't care about disappearing as long as he learned more about Selim.

And whether she understood or not, Selim opened her mouth to tell him her story. She wanted to hold on to his heart for even a second more.

"Please... listen to my story. How I was born, and why I decided to look like a human. I've always wanted to tell someone. If I didn't... I would end up forgetting one day if it was all real, or a story I made up in my head."

Val nodded solemnly.

Now that he thought about it, that was the reason he had tried to get closer to her in the first place. But now, even though he no longer felt it necessary, Val wanted to listen to what Selim had to say.

Even one word more. For even one second more.

It was the first powerful desire he felt since he had taken on his new form of existence.

"Thank you, Selim."

One look at her smile was enough for Val to realize how he felt about her.

And at that moment, the guardian spirit of Growerth smiled sheepishly.

Selim responded with a smile of her own.

Captivated by her radiance, Val finally put words to his emotions.

He would convey the fact of his heart—his existence—to Selim.

He mumbled to himself,

"Beautiful..."

And gave her his answer.

"Let's live on. Together."

Epilogue B - No Day Ends Without a Dusk

An underground conference hall, somewhere in Paris.

"...is what I hear. It's ninety-percent over." Laetitia said quietly, holding her cell phone in one hand.

"Zygmunt was captured by Dorothy. We'll get her in the mail eventually, although I'm almost concerned about who's going to be the lucky recipient."

In her other hand were several pieces of splintered wood, and pinned to the wall before her was Caldimir, still partly skewered with stakes.

"First you get my hopes up with a rescue, then you deliver bad news. What's your game, Laetitia?"

"I was feeling merciful at this point. ...And I assume you'll be able to get yourself off the wall now."

"Hmph."

Caldimir sighed and stepped onto the floor.

His arms and legs, pinned to the wall, were now free. The wounds covering his body were being quickly healed, new skin growing over his injuries.

"Damn it... First Relic, then Valdred. Why do these maddening powerhouses all gather on that godforsaken island?!"

"Ever heard of public esteem?"

"I refuse to acknowledge it. I refuse!"

Caldimir put on a look of disgust and clenched his fists. But the word 'maddening' seemed to have reminded him of something as he turned to Laetitia with a composed expression.

"Speaking of which... Rudi knows the truth now, doesn't he? Doesn't that mean there's a chance of him turning on us?" He wondered nervously. But Laetitia shook her head.

"Correction. Call him an even more subservient pawn."

"Hm? Did something happen to him?"

Laetitia grinned.

Taking delight in the misfortune of others, she gleefully divulged the Eater's fate.

"Rudi and Theresia—"

A beach on southern Growerth.

As he lay on the sandy beach, Rudi looked up at the sky.

The stars were covered by a thick layer of clouds.

But from the blackness emerged Theresia.

His childhood friend. The girl who killed his sister, loved Theo, and brought him out of the cavern.

"I'm surprised you're not saying anything to me." She said.

Rudi was well enough to speak, at the very least. But he said nothing. He didn't know what he should say, and he knew that nothing he said could heal his wounded heart.

But thinking that he should at least respond to Theresia, he carefully chose his words.

"We've been living under a curse."

But he was really talking to himself, not Theresia.

The words were coming from another self within his heart.

He had been saying this for many years now. For a very long time.

Theresia took hold of Rudi's hand and pulled him to his feet. The latter stood and continued.

"We've passed the point of no return. Now... all I have is my revenge. There's nothing else I have to do; nothing else I want to do. I don't even hate you for turning my sister to ashes. Because in the end, *I'm* the one who hated her."

"But you haven't abandoned your hatred of Theo, have you?"

Theresia already knew the answer. Rudi answered, and added a question of his own.

"No. I haven't. But... why did you help me all this time, even though I was trying to get revenge on Theo?"

"Because... because I love him. I told you, I'm a jealous person." Theresia said, intending to reveal everything, "I want to murder anyone who's by his side, right before his eyes. All of them. That's... what you were planning, too. Right?"

Theresia already knew Rudi's answer. It was because she knew that she had walked at his side along the path of the Eater.

Though Rudi did not reply, Theresia continued. She would spill the dark emotions that had filled her heart all these years.

"I'm going to keep loving Theo until the end. So... you can spend the next hundred years torturing him, and I'll give all my love to Theo, who's going to be all alone. That... makes sense, right?"

"Theresia..."

Rudi quietly called her name, but said nothing more. Unable to name the complicated emotion swelling in his heart, he fanned the flames of hatred against Theo.

Not knowing that the emotion's name was envy.

His childhood friend—his final pillar of support. Even she had been taken away by Theo. Rudi did not realize that he was nurturing envy in his heart.

Theresia said nothing, even after Rudi called her name. But she eventually smiled and held out her hand.

"Let's go back. We can start over. Our lives, your revenge, and my love."

"Yeah. You're right..."

Rudi let himself fall into Theresia's arms.

Now left with no option but to place his trust in the girl who killed his sister,

Rudi burst into tears in her embrace.

Without a single sob,

Without a single cry of anguish,

He wept so very silently.

Then, he was struck by agony.

"...?!"

The source of the pain became clear instantly.

But Rudi did not realize why it had happened.

Theresia's right hand had been driven deep into his chest.

He felt something cold sliding down his back. It must have been the silver tip of her whip.

"There... sia...?"

'Did you hate me after all for wanting to make Theo suffer?'

But her confession earlier did not seem to be a lie. As Rudi tried to look ahead, lost in confusion, he spotted a small figure behind Theresia.

A young girl, standing all alone on the beach. She didn't show an ounce of fear at the sight unfolding before her eyes.

Although Rudi had no way of knowing, the girl was the same one who had visited the viscount, bumped into Val at the opening ceremony, and offered a deal to the mayor that night.

Rudi recognized her.

"You..."

He had seen her several days earlier.

The one vampire he had been unable to kill at the massacre in the mine. Theresia had run after her into the shaft to finish her, but—

'It can't be...'

A momentary lapse in pain gave way to a flood of fear, pulsating in time with his heartbeat.

And the moment he looked at Theresia's eyes, his fears became a reality.

She wore an empty expression, just like the humans who had been subjugated by Zygmunt. Her eyes were hazy and unfocused, not even looking in Rudi's direction.

"...Subjugation...!"

The moment he came to the realization, Rudi coughed up a great deal of blood. It covered Theresia's face in red.

His legs were trembling, unable to sustain his weight any longer. The moment Theresia removed her arm, he would fall in a heap on the ground.

Theresia mechanically withdrew her hand.

Rudi was led by gravity, falling face-first into the sand as he felt the sensation of being sucked into the ground.

His senses were still perfectly functional. The cool touch of the sand, his own warm blood, and the excruciating pain in his chest... But it was the pain alone that filled his thoughts.

"Now do you know what it feels like to lose?" The little girl finally said as Rudi lay prone on the beach.

She sneered at him with hatred clear in her eyes.

"...You know, I was the real ringleader in that mine." She said, "I'm not much of a fighter, but I have a knack for subjugation. If it's just one measly person, I could subjugate them with a tiny scratch. I normally have my loyal servants pretend to be the leader, but I never thought they'd be massacred by someone like you."

Rudi was no longer listening, but the girl didn't seem to care.

"Just when this girl was about to kill me, she looked down for a moment and apologized. I didn't let my chance slip by. That's all."

The girl licked the blood staining Theresia's hand. And with a smile, she licked the blood on Theresia's face and drank it down.

"I'm an old acquaintance of the viscount, you know. I needed his permission if I wanted to take revenge while I was on this island. So I made a deal with him. In exchange for handing over information about you to him, I would get permission to take revenge here. On the condition that I didn't harm any of the islanders, of course."

Rudi had no idea what the girl's strange actions meant. Why was she drinking his blood, which had spilled onto Theresia?

But even if he knew the answer to his questions, he was powerless to do a thing.

The girl pressed her foot down on his back. And with an innocent smile, she spat out words filled with venom.

"...Let me tell you something good before you go. Everything Theresia said just now was true. Everything she said in the cavern and the beach! I only activated my subjugation now. Just one teensy second before she stabbed you in the gut. I was going to do it a little earlier, but you don't know how lucky it was for me that it was just the two of you left here!"

The girl's tone suddenly shifted. Drowning in her own glee, she laughed maniacally as she plunged her fingernails into Rudi's wound.

"Ahahahahahaha! Why don'tcha cry some more and weep like a bitch?! C'mon! Whine like a dog and beg me for mercy!"

But Rudi's body had already lost the capacity to feel. Not even his reflexes were functioning.

The girl looked at his prone form and spat, annoyed.

"So you're already dead, huh? Seriously seriously seriously you're soooooooooooooo boring and stupid and annoying and dumb!"

But as she went for the kill,

'It' made land with a thunderous roar.

A strange creature about five meters in length splashed and flailed as it slid in from the sea and halfway up the beach.

It looked almost like a gigantic shark, but there was something quite different about it.

This was not the natural form of any fish. Most nauseating of all were its eyes.

Countless eyeballs were clustered together like those of an insect's, creating a pair of eyeballs about forty centimeters in diameter. The smell of rotting fish permeated the air. The weak of heart might have vomited or lost consciousness already.

The 'thing' finally came to a full stop. Its back split open, and from the gap emerged a dark figure.

The creature covered in black spun their head around and said to themselves:

"I'm so tired. I am."

The bandaged figure stepped down onto the beach and looked back at the monstrous fish that had encapsulated them. They then uttered,

"...Rot."

At that point, the mass of flesh and bones began to foam at the surface. It was as though the entire body was competing to see which part would rot first as it quickly crumbled.

The sticky pieces of flesh melted into the sand with a sickening odor, and soon turned into a mass like a pile of putrid food and decomposed on the beach.

As the figure in black watched their vehicle crumble, they also glared at Rudi and the girl.

"...Did you see something just now? Did you see? You're better off not remembering. You're better off."

The moment the girl caught a glimpse of the look in the figure's eye, she began trembling like a leaf.

An emotion she thought she would never again feel thanks to her newfound powers—the emotion called fear—swept through her like a gust of wind.

'This is bad.'

Through the Eater, she had just taken hold of Relic von Waldstein's absolute power. And yet—no, because she had become so powerful, she was able to sense the danger emanating from the figure.

'This vampire is trouble. I can feel it.'

Even if the girl were to fight from the most advantageous of positions, the bandaged vampire's chilling aura implied that they might utilize a kind of fighting style far removed from that of Relic's.

"...Let us go, Theresia." The girl said elegantly, her calm restored by the chill emanating from the newcomer. She switched her tone so quickly she could probably give the mayor a run for his money.

"...Yes."

The subjugated Eater nodded with empty eyes. She took hold of the girl's arm and leapt from the beach, disappearing into the distance in one bound with her enhanced strength.

She left without so much as a glance—or a word of goodbye—at the childhood friend she had mutilated.

Meanwhile, Rudi's heart had already stopped beating.

The blood supply was cut off from his brain. All he had to do now was wait in silence for his consciousness to fade.

Now certain of his own death, the boy found himself filled with a surprising sense of calm.

'Ah... I... I'm going to disappear now. Yeah. I'm finally... finally going to disappear.'

Curiously enough, his consciousness smiled at his newfound peace. He was elated that his hatred of Theo, his resentment stemming from Elsa, and his anger at himself was finally going to fade.

'Yeah... I think this is what I've wanted all this time.'

'The one I wanted to kill most... was myself.'

'So... this is enough.'

But for some reason, even though his sense of hearing had ceased to function, he heard a voice as though he was hallucinating.

"Huh? What's this? What's this? Aren't you Rudi the Nidhogg? Aren't you? Then that girl just now was Theresia? She was? I lost her? This is no good. No good at all."

Knowing that the collapsed Eater was part of the Organization, Garde pulled up his body.

"But why are you dying now? Why are you?"

Even more blood drained from Rudi's brain as his head was pulled up. His vision went dark.

"I have to save you now. I have to!"

No longer able to feel the sense of touch, Rudi had no idea what was happening to him. He felt as though something had flowed into his body from his neck, but at that point, he was unable to even sense temperature.

But there was one thing he sensed for certain. He heard Garde's one-word command.

"...Heal."

The moment the word registered in his mind, his every cell obeyed.

And Rudi opened his eyes.

Not knowing what had happened, he realized that the wounds that had covered his body were gone. Even the pain had disappeared.

"For now, you're my subordinate. You are. From today on, you're going to take orders from me. You are."

Rudi looked up at the owner of the voice. He recognized the vampire, having seen them once or twice at the Organization. Caldimir had warned him to stay away from this particular officer.

"I don't know what happened here. I don't. But did you really think you'd be happy once you died? Did you really think you could die?"

The bandaged figure questioned Rudi as though having read his mind.

"No, no, no. You are our dog. You are. Dogs don't kill themselves. Nope. Understand? Super-clear? You're a sin, you know. You Eaters are a sin to us vampires. If you ate a hundred vampires, you have to save a hundred vampires. If you ate a thousand vampires, you have to do all their work for us. Redemption. Let's call it redemption."

'No... Please, no! How... how much longer do I have to suffer through this? ...No... Kill me... Please, kill me!'

As the hound attempted to talk back, the bandaged figure smiled gleefully. They cast a single spell to make a dog out of the dog.

"...Do not flee."

The moment the command reached Rudi's body and soul, he remembered the viscount's final words to him. A series of letters in red, looking for all the world like a death sentence.

[After all, you are already trapped in the cycle of vengeance and repentance... for all eternity.]

The moment he finally understood the meaning of those words, the one-man army—now a dog of the bandaged vampire—broke out into anguished sobs.

But Garde gave no ear to the Eater's cries, happily speaking from underneath the bandages.

"All right. All right. I'm going to have you tell me. What happened on the island? How much of the problem did Mister Gerhardt manage to solve? Tell me everything! With lots of details!"

Garde's demands reached Rudi's ears in the midst of his sobs. They filled his very cells, not permitting insubordination of any kind.

"...Speak."

But Garde Ritzberg had made a careless mistake.

Moments before he approached, a bat had latched onto Rudi and sucked his blood.

The girl had noticed the bat, and was about to destroy it immediately.

But spared by Garde's sudden intrusion, the bat that had feasted on Rudi's blood soared into the skies unharmed.

It returned to the body for which it beat—the place it truly belonged.

†

Neuberg City Hall. The mayor's office.

"How long you planning to crash here, asshole?"

"Who knows? Probably 'til I get word from Miss Dorothy." Bridgestone said, not even looking at Watt as he answered.

"Tch."

Watt looked disgusted, but he seemed to have wanted a change of pace. He stepped over to the window and opened it.

A cool breeze blew into the office. Bridgestone finally looked at him.

"Hey. If you're gonna fly off, I'll shoot you down before you get off the ground. And if you're just gonna jump, I'll still shoot you down before you hit the ground. Sorry, but I'm too good to miss." He warned, but his eyes caught sight of something flying in from the outside.

The creature was a perfectly ordinary bat. With the exception of its eerie human eyes.

"...Melhilm?"

The familiar bat disappeared into Watt's silhouette as he stood facing the window, before being sucked into his chest.

"...?"

'What was that?' Bridgestone was about to ask, but at that moment, the entire office was gripped by a chill.

It was as though something had materialized in the room.

"So..."

Slowly, Watt turned around and repeated himself.

"How long you planning to crash here, asshole?"

Several seconds later.

One of the office windows shattered, and a man was sent flying.

The blond-haired, blue-eyed man fell head-first to the ground, already unconscious before the impact.

Watt had defeated an officer of the Organization in a matter of moments. Although that would not be enough to kill Bridgestone, Watt could no longer be defeated. No amount of overconfidence or disdain for others would be a weakness now.

But even as he savored his newfound powers, Watt did not lose himself to conceit. For now, all he did was laugh.

"Heh. Heh heh..."

Relishing in the sensation of crawling up from the depths, he laughed and laughed and laughed.

"Ahaha... Hahahahahahah! Ahahahahahaha!"

The shattered glass fragments from his window were transformed into a flock of countless bats before they hit the ground.

"Amazing... All this knowledge about using these powers is flooding into my head...! Ahaha! Hahahaha!"

The bats swarmed toward the window frame, and in a matter of seconds, the sheet of glass was back where it was supposed to be.

Relic von Waldstein was the apex of power, the product of years of the Organization's research.

Drunk on himself, who had taken hold of that power, Watt laughed out loud in the deserted office.

Imagining the places he would now climb to,

The petty villain, possessed of power, did nothing but laugh.

Laughter was all that filled his thoughts.

The sound of his voice echoed across the island, announcing the birth of a new power like the cries of a newborn.

Epilogue C - In the Space Between Night and Day

Neuberg Central Hospital. The surgical unit.

It had been three weeks since the incident on the island.

The first night of the Carnale Festival had been interrupted by the commotion, but the rest of the festivities had gone off without a hitch.

By the final day of the celebrations, very few were still concerned about the mysterious incidents from the first day. Those who knew of the viscount and the vampires of the castle understood implicitly that something must have happened, and began to claim that the incident that day was a planned part of the opening ceremony. The rumor circulated among the festival-goers in the exuberance of the celebrations, and the commotion was slowly brought under control.

Meanwhile, Michael had finally been moved out of the intensive care unit, and was now allowed to have visitors.

The vampires had, of course, come to see him before regardless of hospital regulations. But in conversations, they had always been on their toes for fear of worsening his condition. Now, they could finally pay him a proper visit.

The news spread like wildfire, and one after another, guests came to visit Michael in the hospital.

During the day and the evening, Michael greeted his parents and a flood of classmates. He had told his human friends that he was injured in a car accident, preventing word about vampires from getting out. Of course, Michael would personally have no qualms about such a thing.

In fact, the biggest problem seemed to be the fact that Hilda went through great pains in dealing with the fallout from their parents. And as they finally made the decision to pack up and leave the island for good, Michael managed to convince them otherwise with this argument:

"Ma. Pop. Remember how you hired those Hunters last year and they made a big mess? Now we can call it even. Actually, I guess you can't make anything even with stuff like this. And besides, Ferret didn't do anything wrong."

It grew late, and even his parents returned home. There was very little time left until visiting hours ended.

That was when a different group of guests came to see him.

It was eight in the evening, and the front desk was closed. A large group of vampires was walking through the surprisingly quiet halls.

"So we're here to see Michael. But what exactly are we supposed to do?"

"Leave him a present and go, I guess."

"I brought him some dirty books."

"Perfect. You're gonna slip 'em behind his pillow, right?"

"That's when Ferret finds the books."

"Michael gets punched." "She punches him so hard his injuries open up again." "He has to stay in the hospital even longer." "Ferret comes to visit him every day." "Their love deepens." "And then the dirty book starts not looking so dirty after all." "A special nighttime healing session." "Romance time in the hospital!" "Heh heh heh... I like the sound of that."

As the conversation degenerated, the vampires turned the corner to the door to Michael's room. There they ran into several others who had come even earlier. Relic, Hilda, Grandmother Job, and Mage.

"Hey! What're you all—"

But the man stopped himself before he could finish his question.

The people gathered outside the hospital room had simultaneously glared at him and gestured for silence. It looked more like a command than a request, so the group of vampires were half-frightened into approaching slowly without a sound.

Their powerful hearing caught the conversation coming from the room.

"...I'm so happy I'm in the hospital, Ferret."

"What a foolish thought."

"C'mon, Ferret. Nothing makes me happier than watching you peel apples for me."

"If you are incapable of imagining *normal* happiness, you must be truly lacking in imagination, Michael."

Ferret was in the room alone with Michael, sullenly peeling apples as the latter lay in his bed. There was an awkward tension in the air.

Ferret was not yet accustomed to using a fruit knife. On occasion, she worriedly looked at her clumsily-peeled apples and brought the knife to them once more.

It was a perfectly mundane series of actions, but Michael seemed for all the world to be on cloud nine. He smiled—almost like a saint—and mumbled:

"Nothing makes me happier than being with you, Ferret."

Michael had said much the same thing many times in the past.

Normally, Ferret might have snapped back at him by that point. But for some reason, she remained silent.

Michael wondered if he had done something wrong, and thought over what he had just said.

'Did I say something weird while I was half-asleep? Or... wait. I wonder if she's still jealous about how Val transformed into her and gave me a kiss last year? Man, that's kind of sweet! Heh heh heh.'

As his thoughts gave way to fantasies, Michael found himself quickly dragged back into reality by Ferret's declaration.

"...I still have not yet conveyed my thanks, have I?"

"Hm?"

"I... wish to show you my gratitude for rescuing me that day."

'What? I rescued her?'

He was the one who had been saved, Michael wanted to say, but so determined was Ferret's expression that he could not say a word.

"...Thanks."

Her stiff formality was nowhere to be found. Ferret was addressing Michael as a girl her own age should.

"Thanks, Michael. For everything."

"...Uh..."

The girl shyly averted her gaze. It was a gesture she never allowed herself to use under normal circumstances. That alone was enough to make Michael blush as red as a tomato. In fact, he was silenced for a moment.

But Michael soon put on a smile like before and said in a serious tone,

"Then... Ferret, could I ask for just one thing?"

Ferret was taken aback, but answered.

"...If that wish is within the realm of possibility."

"Let's go to next year's Carnale Festival together."

"...You truly know no greed, Michael." Ferret sighed, astonished. But there was a hint of a smile on her lips. "But that's why I've always..."

She trailed off, turning her attention once more to the task of peeling apples.

Then, she steeled her resolve and made to re-conjure the words she had been about to dismiss.

But at that moment, her acute sense of hearing noticed everything around her. The sound of Michael's heart beating, and the sound of everyone in the hall gulping in unison.

'...What?'

It was only then that Ferret noticed the many presences in the hallway. She took to her feet, knife in hand, and slammed open the door.

"Ah..."

Huddled there were later arrivals like werewolves, witches, and maids in plainclothes, along with many others she knew well. In all, about thirty of the island's residents had been listening intently to the conversation.

"...What... what is the meaning of this, Honored Brother?"

Relic, who had been at the head of the group of eavesdroppers, averted his eyes from his sister (who wore a look of utter shame and indignity) and mumbled an excuse.

"Well, uh... we all happened to meet up at the lobby just now! And... um... we just got here, and I was about to open the door!"

"...Honored Brother?"

Ferret's usually pale face was dyed a deep pink, just like a human's. Perhaps some sort of emotional stimulus had spurred her blood to move through telekinesis. But no one had to make such an analysis in order to see that Ferret's mortification was giving way to outrage.

"Uh. Well. Excuse us."

The freeloading vampires began to briskly walk away, but they bumped into the werewolves standing behind them and dropped their gift for Michael.

Ferret found her eyes drawn to the books falling to the floor.

And so began a night of outlandish commotion at the hospital.

"It's nice to hear all this noise." Michael said with a smile as Relic slipped away from the confusion and came to his bedside. The former's grin was unchanged, in spite of his many injuries.

"I'm a little worried about them making such a racket at the hospital, though." Relic said, but at this point the sounds were still soft enough to avoid being intrusive. Hilda and the jester were desperately trying to stop Ferret as she choked the freeloading vampires.

"Feeling better now?"

"Yeah. My right hand and leg still don't move that well, though."

So casual was Michael's response that it took a moment before Relic grasped the gravity of his friend's physical state.

How badly had Michael been injured? How much longer would it be until he could move again? Michael's words provided precious little insight to any of his questions.

"They said my leg's going to get better after I do some rehab. And my arm... We won't know 'til the bone heals. Heh. But you know, even if my right hand never moves again, I'm real thankful to it—now I can go to the Carnale Festival with Ferret next year!"

"Michael... Don't say things like that. You're going to be fine. Otherwise... you won't be able to illustrate that storybook about Ferret." Relic said hoarsely. But Michael's reply was as cheerful as ever.

"Heh. If my right hand stops working, I'll practice so I can draw with my left. And if I can't do that, I'll paint holding the brush between my teeth. My dreams aren't gonna die just because I got beaten up by that armor guy."

Relic knew that Michael was neither bluffing nor trying to console him. Michael truly had Ferret in mind as he spoke. And so, Relic dropped the topic of his health.

He took a seat by the bed and bowed his head.

"Thanks."

"What, you too, Relic?"

"I wanted to thank you properly. As Ferret's brother, and as Lord of Waldstein Castle. And also as your friend. Thank you so much, Michael."

Michael looked away, embarrassed. He tried to change the subject and returned to Relic's statement.

"Right... I don't know the details, but I did hear you became the new Lord."

"Not like anything's really changed, though."

"Come to think of it, what about the viscount? Is he holed up in the castle now, enjoying his retirement? Spending all his time on the internet?"

"No, actually..."

Relic stumbled as he tried to find a good way to word his response.

"Right now... he's not on the island."

†

An underground conference hall, somewhere in Paris.

"...Ahem. Let us begin proceedings."

"So why're you acting all high-and-mighty again, Caldimir?"

Dozens upon dozens of vampires were seated at chairs draped in all sorts of colors.

Caldimir's practiced call to order was interrupted by Bridgestone, but the former ignored his fellow officer and began the conference.

"Dear god... The attendance rate today surpasses even that of our last conference! Of course. Of course! You finally acknowledge my power! You finally understand who is truly superior to you all! A wise decision indeed. Muahahaha..."

"Mwa ha ha my ass. I swear, you and Watt both. I'll mess you up good one of these days."

Caldimir's attitude had reminded Bridgestone of his defeat at Watt's hands a month earlier.

He had been retrieved by his brother in the aftermath of the one-sided battle, but he had lost his temper on the ferry to the mainland, demanding, "LET ME GO! I'LL MURDER THAT BASTARD, I SWEAR!". In the end, even Ishibashi(who had held him back with his shadows) was taken to the police station once they reached the mainland.

Whether he knew or not, Caldimir confidently surveyed the conference hall.

He took great delight at the nearly-full seats, before he realized that one of the empty chairs had been draped with a red cloth.

'Revolting. I don't remember ordering for a red seat.'

His good mood soured by thoughts of Gerhardt, Caldimir opened his mouth to order the removal of the chair.

But at that moment, Laetitia stood from the orange seat and called out in a commanding voice:

"Attention! Friends, I introduce you to a new addition to our ranks!"

"What?"

Caldimir's confusion went ignored as the conference hall was filled with a round of enthusiastic applause.

Never in his life had Caldimir been the subject of such a cheer. Upset by this, he angrily turned to Laetitia.

"What is the meaning of this, Laetitia. You never told me about any new officers!"

"That would be because I said nothing to you."

"How dare you..."

As Caldimir seethed in rage, something in his line of sight flickered.

The red cloth that had been draped over the empty seat began to squirm. Caldimir quickly realized under the lights that the 'cloth' was of a completely different texture than he had assumed. He froze.

"It... it can't be...!"

Though Caldimir hoped against hope that everything was just a bad dream, the red pool of liquid slid into the air and wrote in large letters:

[Good day to you all, my dear friends! It has indeed been much too long! In fact, I see many new faces here today. For the sake of such officers, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gerhardt von Waldstein! In the distant past, I was a part of the Organization. I had left my post for a time to fulfill my personal responsibilities, but now that I have returned in one piece, I shall pour heart and soul into the task of bettering the Organization!]

The viscount's grandiose speech was met with another impassioned round of applause.

In the midst of the noise, Gerhardt separated a small part of himself, and wrote to the man sitting in the violet seat:

[Did I not say that we would meet sooner than you expected, Melhilm?]

Melhilm chuckled bitterly at his old friend and said,

"...Irrational as usual, Gerhardt."

"Why... why did I not know about this?!" Caldimir cried, his panic escalating. But no one in the conference hall would answer his question. He was without allies; Zygmut almost never attended their meetings, and Laetitia was currently at the viscount's side.

But the viscount decided to respond, writing out in Russian to Caldimir:

[I'd just passed on my position to my son, you see. With all this time on my proverbial hands, I thought I might return to the company of my old friends and acquaintances!]

"You think I'll just accept this, Gerhardt?!"

[Speaking of which...]

Ignoring Caldimir's howls of rage, the viscount simply continued to write.

[Make no mistake; do not think that I hold no anger against you, Caldimir.]

"Wha..."

It was quite unusual to hear such unfriendly words from the viscount. Caldimir groaned.

[But as we are now allies—fellow members of the Organization—I shall not loose my displeasure upon you.]

"Hmph... You hypocrite."

Caldimir seemed to be put at ease by the viscount's attitude, quickly putting on a new face.

But the viscount would not let him pass without taking vengeance.

[Ah, of course... I happened to notice, Caldimir, that you have once more made several errors during the distribution of invitations. So I took it upon myself to invite Black, Mirror, Gold, Silver, Pearl, Clear, and Sepia!]

"...Wha...?"

Before Caldimir could fully process the viscount's claim, a hand wrapped in black bandages suddenly touched his back.

"Why didn't you get me a seat? Why didn't you? Where are our seats? Where are they?"

"G... Garde...!"

Caldimir could not bring himself to turn around. The Black Gravekeeper's voice had appeared out of nowhere.

"Lots more people are here today, you know? Lots more people! They're all really really looking forward to talking to you. They are! Out in the hallway waiting for you!"

A glint of fury made home in Garde's eyes. When Caldimir looked over he shoulder and at the half-ajar door, he saw the officers he had neglected to invite—those he did not wish to meet—smiling belligerently outside.

"Hey, Garde."

Caldimir could feel his consciousness go faint. The man in the yellow seat was saying something, but it was beginning to sound foggy.

"I'm in!"

Ishibashi, sitting in the indigo seat, decided that he would not take part this time. He watched his brother and began to quietly pray for Caldimir's soul.

Of course, that did not mean he would go in to help Caldimir.

As the Blue Flow of Blood was dragged into the hallway, Laetitia shook in ecstasy.

In other words, there was little out of the ordinary at today's conference.

"I see. So that is the kind of man Gerhardt is." Tromm Ed Romans the Dark Grey said, listening to the uproar in the hallway. The trembling creature turned to the pristine white vampire next to him.

"...He is indeed a difficult man to understand." He said. It was not clear if he was showing disdain or respect.

But Dorothy smiled brightly and nodded.

"Isn't he just wonderful?"

Epilogue D - And as for the Sinner...

Waldstein Castle, Laboratory.

<Doctor...>

In the lab, the white coffin sighed before the large cauldron.

Even though she now knew that his true name was Theodosius,

Even though she now knew that his strange, elder-like attitude would never return,

And even though she now knew everything he had to tell, to Professor, Doctor was still no one but himself.

After the incident, Doctor had locked himself in his room in the laboratory.

He spent days upon days in there, neither eating nor drinking blood.

Several concerned visitors dropped by to see him, but he refused to answer their calls.

But finally, just as Professor was contemplating breaking down his door, he emerged from his room with his eyes puffy and red.

<D-Doctor! Are you all right, Doctor?! Please be okay!>

Professor quickly reached out to support the staggering boy, and slowly sat him down in a nearby chair.

"I... I was having a dream."

The boy laughed masochistically, looking down upon his own body—the body that would live on even after being denied food or drink.

"In my dream... I saw everything I'd done since that day fifteen years ago. I murdered humans... sucked their blood... burned down entire villages... laughed while I destroyed everything... and in the end, I... I betrayed my friends. I laughed as I betrayed them."

<...>

"I know. I know dying won't be enough to make up for all my sins. But it's the same for living. I can't repent for my crimes even as I live. And if nothing I do will change that... maybe I should just suffer and disappear from the world."

His empty chuckling had turned to tears of horror. They dripped down his face as he cried like a child of his physical age.

"But... I still want to help them."

As he wept, he revealed his selfish desires.

"Rudi and Theresia... They were the first people to call me a friend. I stabbed them in the back and took away everything from them. But... but if it's all right, I..."

With great difficulty, Doctor choked back his sobs. He sought salvation at the hands of the coffin, one who did not know first-hand of his crimes. Just like the barber who had seen the king's donkey ears, he was compelled to spill his secrets to someone who knew nothing.

"I... I want them to find happiness."

<...How could you say that...? Oh, Doctor... you're awful...>

"I know."

It seemed as though Professor was rebuffing him. But Doctor did not try to correct her.

"I know that nothing I do will ever be enough to make up for what I've done. But... but I'm still wandering, looking for someone to act as my judge. I... I want someone to pass judgement on me. I want someone to punish me—hand down my sentence. I... I want to repent and be forgiven..."

He was a monster in the shape of a human child.

When the monster awoke from the intoxicating influence of destruction, he brought a curse upon himself.

That curse stole something away from him.

Punishment had been removed from the boy's world.

He would never again be allowed to find redemption.

Neither a child,

Nor an adult.

The monster stuck between the two worlds was left to suffer for eternity.

And now, the monster was professing his pain to the coffin at his side.

He was wandering a road without destination, seeking the punishment he had surely earned.

He pressed forward, showered with curses on his nigh-immortal life.

He continued on, knowing that no punishment would absolve him of his sins.

<...You've got something wrong, Doctor.>

Doctor's wandering thoughts were quickly brought back to reality by the voice coming from the speakers.

<You don't need to be worthy of anything to save people! You don't need to get permission to save your friends!> She cried, desperately conveying her emotions to the boy who had brought her salvation, <so please... please let me help you, Doctor!>

There was firm strength in her words, but to Doctor, it almost sounded as though Professor was crying. Though she had neither tears nor a face through which she could convey her emotions, and even though her voice sounded so energetic, Doctor was certain that she was in tears.

<I don't have anything to offer, but please... let me help you, Doctor!>

Was he just imagining things? Was his subconscious so selfish and desperate for someone who would cry for his sake?

Unable to accept or deny Professor's request, Doctor looked at her, tears streaming down his face.

"...Thank you."

No matter where he ran, he would be faced with the same conclusion. But Doctor knew that he could still reach out a hand to others—even if he was never forgiven. With that in mind, he silently made a vow.

He would save Rudi and Theresia. He would never give up on them.

And once he had completed his task, he would accept all that awaited him.

Before he knew it, his tears had run dry.

"Thank you, Professor."

Having repeated himself,

The sinner smiled sadly.

An Extraneous Exchange. A certain mayor's phone call.

<...So if that bandaged man is also part of Caldimir's Organization, I need more pawns. I need more pawns if I want to destroy that disgusting gathering.>

"...And so you came crawling to me for help. You're pretty smart, I'll give you that, but who the hell do you think I am? I'm an Organization member too."

<But you've already sold me information on the Organization in exchange for information on Theresia. And besides... My superior's a *human*. One that's much more useful to you than Caldimir.>

"...Listen up, you pissy brat. One. Fucking. Deal. That was as far as I was willing to go. And about what happened—you tried to snuff out my bat back there, you bitch. If it wasn't for that black thing, I'd actually have been *hurt*."

<What? Aww, don't be like that, Handsome! I'm not a bad girl—>

"Go to hell and pay off my crimes while you're at it. Then you can feel free to kick the bucket like the bitch you are."

<Wait! Don't hang up! We're friends, you know? Friends who gained the same power.>

"...I don't see why I gotta share. You and Relic both are nothing but fucking nuisances to me."

<...Same to you, mayor. I plan to use you for all your worth before killing you.>

"That's actually a bit surprising. I was planning to kill you before I used you. ...But points for thinking along that line."

<You know... I hate losing, too.>

-Vamp! 11+111 End-



「あんぶ! II・III 完

Afterword

Hello, this is Narita.

I fell for my editor's trick in the previous afterword.

So I complained, and he told me, "Then I'll give you twelve pages this time!".

Hooray. Now I can ramble—

...Heh heh heh.

I know.

Yes, I know.

...But still!

-1-

It does seem a bit cheeky of me, but I'll keep the twelve pages in mind and reach the end!

...But I have an even smaller word count to work with than last time. Or is it just my imagination?

But it's the attitude of a mature person to do his work while pretending not to notice such things.

-2-

Viva adulthood.

Paying a little more on the subway or at the amusement part to feel like a VIP. Yes. It's proof that we have more money than children.

When children get angry at this reality, I—the adult—say to them,

"If you brats are angry, just grow up."

...Wait, am I actually being more childish than them?!

...In any case, if I have too many pages to work with, I'll end up going on tangents like this. So I'll steel myself and finally write a real afterword.

Since I've got a whopping twelve pages, let's start off with a preview for the next volume!

Preview 1: The Past 1

Theo, once a villain and monster without equal. What happened between those days and his new life as Doctor?

A pursuer from the Organization draws near. Will he be able to escape the clutches of Azure?

-4-

And what of the connection between Theresia and Theo?

Doctor and Professor's past, which was not revealed in his volume, is unveiled!

Coming next year! (Probably)

Preview 2: The Past 2

Dorothy, who appeared out of nowhere with claims of being the viscount's fiancée.

How was the Organization formed? What past do Caldimir, the viscount, and Melhilm share?

-5-

How in the world did Dorothy end up falling in love with the slimy red viscount?

The viscount's human form finally makes an appearance! Maybe.

-6-

A heart-pounding romantic comedy about the daily lives of vampires, coming next year!
(Probably)

Preview 3: The Present

The boy is a new recruit to the Organization. And alongside a girl who is his fellow newbie, they are assigned to work under Aiji Ishibashi, the I-Shadow.

Their relationship is a rocky one from the start, but one day, they are dispatched to rural Italy as subordinates of Ishibashi.

As expectations are smashed to bits, the boy and the girl are sucked into a whirlpool of chaos. How will the confusion change their bond?

Coming next year! (Probably)

-7-

...And the most wanted of the above stories will be chosen for writing, by popular vote!

...If I did that, that would be a hassle. And I think I'll end up not wanting to write whatever comes in first place (what a problematic statement), so I'll just go ahead and write all three.

-8-

Please note that the stories will probably feel very different from the previews I've just written.

Volume IV will be a collection of short stories that I couldn't fit into this volume. It will be an unusual entry in the series, but please give it a read.

Incidentally, for a story taking place during the Carnale Festival, there wasn't much in the way of the celebration itself. If I get the chance, I'd like to one day write about the characters enjoying the festival.

†

As a side note, here are my plans for the future. Hariyama-san, Center of the World—a collection of short stories—will be released in October. It also includes a short story where all the characters from the pieces I wrote in Dengeki hp show up.

And, of all things, it's got two illustrators—both Enami Katsumi-san and Yasuda Suzuhito-san!

Dengeki Bunko is the only place where you can see their beautiful illustrations in a single book (for now)!

After that, I'll end what I need to finish and release Garuguru!, the last volume of the Etsusa Bridge series.

Words of thanks

I was even later for the deadline than last time, causing even more trouble for a lot of people.

...The page count especially was a big problem, so I took the desperate way and cut about sixty pages from the second half—or, actually, I *didn't*. Which is the reason I missed my deadline. But in any case, I am truly sorry.

Editor-in-chief Suzuki-san and Wada-san from the editorial department, the schedule manager Jasmine-san, the publishing department and the proofreaders who had to wait for me, and everyone from Media Works—I'm terribly sorry, and thank you so much!

Thank you to my family, friends, acquaintances, and everyone living in the city of S for your endless support.

And thank you to the authors who allowed me to consult them. Especially Hayama Tohru-san, Arisawa Mamizu-san, and Fujiwara Yū-san, who gave me so much encouragement.

And thank you to Enami Katsumi-san, who drew countless wonderful illustrations—including the dynamic visual of a coffin—and who drew a Vamp! poster for volume 37 of Dengeki hp, which will be released this month(August 2005).

And finally, thank you, readers, for picking up the second half of this arc, and readers who've picked up the entire series!

†

Wow, I really am walking a thin line here. Next time please don't tell me to write sixteen pages



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